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September 3, 1895.

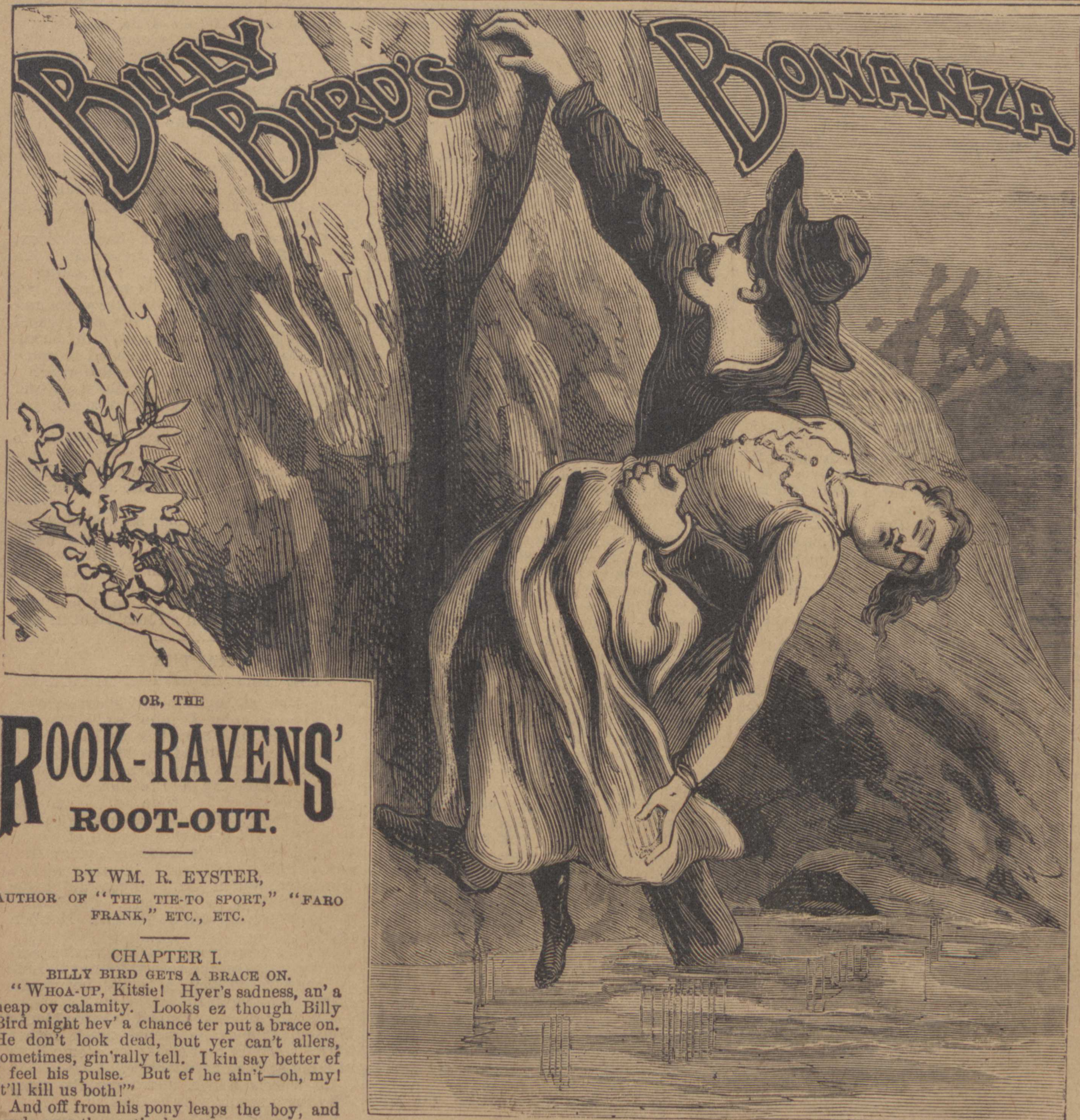
No. 945.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

• Vol. XXXVII.



OR, THE ROOK-RAVENS' ROOT-OUT.

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AUTHOR OF "THE TIE-TO SPORT," "FARO
FRANK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BILLY BIRD GETS A BRACE ON.

"Whoa-up, Kitsie! Hyer's sadness, an' a heap ov calamity. Looks ez though Billy Bird might hev' a chance ter put a brace on. He don't look dead, but yer can't allers, sometimes, gin'rally tell. I kin say better ef I feel his pulse. But ef he ain't—oh, my! It'll kill us both!"

And off from his pony leaps the boy, and bends over the motionless man.

JEAN BARTLETT STAGGERED OUT OF THE WATER, HOLDING DORA'S DRIPPING FIGURE.

There are other little mounds near by, but at them the lad does not look. They have lain there longer, and in them there can be no breath of life; but about this man he is not so certain, and in a moment he knows he has made no mistake.

The closed eyelids open, and a glassy stare rests on the boy as he bends over to touch the flushed face.

"Not dead! Fur a ducket he ain't dead! Goshelmighty, what's ther racket? Looks ez though I'm elected ter be court furnishur, an' ther wages won't be much ov a object. Hyer, pard! A drap ov this—not too much at a time, an' not too offen, er you'll bankrupt ther hull outfit. That's ther talk! Swaller gently, an' let yer thorux hev' time ter recooperate. Yer ain't outen ther woods yit, but chances are yer won't see t'other side ov ther divide—not this time."

Billy Bird rambles on, but, meantime, he is not idle. As he talks he busies himself with the man. He pours a few drops of water between the parched lips, and watches them go gasping down the almost paralyzed throat.

Then a few more.

Then a mouthful. The stock on hand is woefully slender, but the boy thinks it will never be needed more than now. He uses it with liberal discretion, and at last has the pleasure of seeing that John Deming is not only not dead, but is not dying. When he rises up, with more strength than the boy had supposed was in his worn and fevered body, his first words are not of thankfulness.

"Dora, my daughter, where are you?"

"Good land! There's a woman in the case! Jest ez usu'l. Say, pard, this ain't no place fur a woman, an' you better not git ter callin' ov her. She might come."

Deming hears him with more understanding than he has yet shown, and the words bring back his wits as if they were a strong stimulant. He rises, looks around, frightened, but no longer wandering.

"Good Heavens! Is she dead? Look! Quick! We were together but a moment ago!"

He staggers around as though expecting to find her near. He counts over every heap which marks where a silent one lies, but he sees that Dora is no longer there. What has become of her?

Billy Bird watches him curiously. He almost thinks that Deming's senses are still wandering, for no girl was to be seen, nor had there been any in sight when he came to the rescue.

Deming grows more and more bewildered. He cannot understand how his daughter can have vanished; and it seems to him as though as her voice faded out of his hearing, that of Billy came to take its place. He staggeringly searches the sand surrounding him, and looks along the distance toward the far-off hills.

The boy has thrown himself down on the ground, not altogether displeased at the chance to take a little rest, though he would scarcely have cared to waste the moments had he not had such an excuse. He waits and watches. Finally, having become sure there is something more in this than the wild imaginings of a man who has just come out of the shadows of death, he rises carelessly, looks around keenly, and then steps out in the direction in which Deming's eyes most frequently turn. His pony follows after him, sedately pacing at his elbow, with his nose outstretched until it almost rests on the back-turned palm of his master.

For his age there are few better trailers than Billy Bird, and he follows without an effort the indistinct trail Dora has left. He reads its story as he goes along, sees that it has been but lately made. After a little he turns and springs lightly on Kit-

sie's back, where he stands, looking across the plain, shading his eyes with his hand from the glare of the sun, and searching in vain for even a moving spot which might tell him that this man's daughter still lives, and had not given up the conflict for life.

Nothing rewards the effort. He turns slowly around, his gaze sweeping the entire horizon.

Far nor near can he catch a glimpse of any one. Were it not for the trail before him he would feel sure she was a creation of John Deming's brain. But, with those tracks before him, it is hard to believe anything but that she has passed on—and fallen. Somewhere on the way to the hills, and, most likely, at no great distance, the body is no doubt huddled in death.

But, whatever may be his opinion, he does not think it advisable to air it, and when he speaks it is with reference to the needs of the man whom he has just saved.

"Hyer's her trail, pard, an' I reckon she war' wise enough ter keep a humpin'. Kinder looks ez though I hed a glimps' ov her, 'way over yander, but I'm swearin' ter nothin'. Ef ye really wants ter find her yer wants ter git a brace on, an' pull out. She's goin' ther right road, an' ef she kin keep it up'll strike water along about sundown. An' we wants ter git thar' too. This ain't bi'n a cirkimstance ov a day ter what it might be, an' I wouldn't like ter gamble on ter-morrer. D'yer think ye are game ter travel?"

"Wait, wait! Dora would never desert me. If she has gone it is only to return with aid. If I leave this spot she will not find me. We will lose each other. Go to her! Find her if you can, and tell her I am here, and waiting."

Deming speaks wildly, but with a wonderful strength for one who has but lately been so near to death. Billy Bird looks him over curiously before answering:

"Don't reckon you're so far wrong, but you want ter git a move on, fur all ov that. Can't yer see thet ez long ez we foller her trail thar's no time lost? Thar's only one place fur her ter go, an' we're aimin' straight fur it. Ef she starts in on ther back track we'll jest meet her so much the sooner; an' ef she gits off ther trail we maybe kin save her. An' ef she does, an' we don't, she's jest a gone goslin', an' don't yer furgit it. That's straight goods, an' you kin take er leave 'em, an' I want ter know which ye'r' goin' ter do, most mighty quick. You kin chuck ye'r life away ef yer wants to, but I'm lookin' out fur mine. It's all I got, an' I'm holdin' it monstrous high. Come on! Ante up er jump ther game!"

The sharp words of the boy made a strong impression on Deming. He sees there is more hope of meeting his daughter by going forward, and he fancies they may be able to overtake her. This young stranger appears to know something of the ground before them. He resists no longer.

"Won't hurt ye ter stritch ye'r limbs a bit," remarks Billy, settling into his seat.

"Kitsie don't keer ter kerry two, an' I don't just admire ter walk, but I'll watch yer a bit, an' when I see yer needs it we'll spell off. It is a tramp ter take, an' that's a fact. Reckon I saw whar' yer camped last night, an' it's bi'n a right smart journey fur a gal."

"And you?" asks Deming, suspiciously, though he knows by this time that the young stranger has saved his life; "you can hardly be alone. Where is the rest of your party, and who are they? How do you come to be following this trail?"

"Land o' love, stranger, can't ye ask a few more? Not that it makes ary difference. I'm Billy Bird, an' me own party. Ther' rest ov 'em are nowhar', fur they

never was, an' I'm follerin' this trail 'cause it ain't follerin' me. Long ez I'm goin' in this d'rection one ov them two hez ter happen, an' that's ther' best reason fur it. Reckon I'm lookin' fur a bonanzer, but I ain't got clost ter findin' it, ez yet. Now, who be you, an' what blasted nonsense brung you out hyer?"

"My name is John Deming, and my daughter and I were on our way—but the story is too long to tell now. Wait until we have come to a camp. My mind is too disturbed to speak connectedly. Look forward. Are you sure you can see nothing of Dora?"

"Mighty sure. Ye'r' gittin' limber in ther legs ag'in, an' ye better crawl up on Kitsie. She's easy ter ride ef yer behaves yerself. Ef yer don't she'll spread ye, sure."

Billy rolls down off of his pony, and without much persuasion Deming mounts. Kitsie ambles along as though the weight on her back had not been doubled, while the boy trots contentedly at her side. Now and then he takes hold of the nearest stirrup leather, but that is more to keep in touch with horse and rider than for any aid it may give him.

Conversation slackens between the two, who alternately walk and ride, getting over the ground at quite a fair speed. The hills which seemed so far distant when Deming gave up the game, now appear close at hand. He looks at them, and then the blurred marks which he takes to be the trail of his daughter. Exultation is in his tone.

"She is a brave girl. She has toiled on, until by this time she must be safe. She sees us coming, no doubt. For a time I dreaded finding her across our path, but she had strength far beyond her years and sex. When I lay down to die she pressed on with the empty canteen from my shoulder. That told me she intended to come back. Whereabouts does the water lie?"

"Right about yonder, ef them ez told me didn't lie. It's a matter ov a mile yit, I should jedge."

He points with his finger and speaks to Kitsie.

"And Dora! Can you see her? Your eyes are younger than mine, and ought to reach the spot."

"Sorry, pard, but I may as well give you the truth on ther dead level. We won't find Miss Dora there, not this time ov day. She turned off the trail an hour back. We got ter git a fresh outfit afore we kin go frolickin' off after her, an' so, I jest kep' my mouth shet. It'll all kim' right in ther fall."

CHAPTER II.

THE MIRACLE OF THE MIRAGE.

The look of anguish which comes over the face of John Deming saddens even such a free and easy boy as Billy Bird. If he dared he would eat his words and keep the father a little longer in suspense.

"Don't kick ag'in Providence. She's safe enough ef her time ain't come yit, an' so are we. You can't go a mile furder by yerself, an' neither kin I; but ef we re-fit we'll be good fur hours, an' when ther moon kim's up it'll be bright ez day. You want ter wagon right along, an' leave this hyer thing in my han's. I'm bossin' ther job now, an' I'll do it right. Hold on thar'!"

Deming has turned in his tracks, and stolidly starts on the return journey. Left to himself, without a doubt he would tramp on to his death.

But Billy does not intend to leave him to himself, though he would much rather hear a storm of reproaches, or even a little attempt at personal violence.

He wheels Kitsie, and faces the man, drawing a revolver as he does so.

"Sorry, pard, but I ain't takin' no chances, an' I mean ter save ye'r life ef I hev' ter kill yer! You turn squar' 'round an' mosey on tell yer kin stick ye'r nose in ther water an' take a good long pull at ther true oh-be-joyful. You kin fill ther can-teen then, take Kitsie, ef yer wants to, an' do some good. Ef yer struck out this hyer way an' found her you'd both die, dead sure."

Deming, though apparently doggedly determined to go back on the trail, yet discovers he is too weak to resist. From that he learns that submission is true wisdom. The boy has been right; he must regain his strength before he can help the girl he is willing to die for. He sets his face sullenly in the direction in which the water is supposed to be, and Kitsie brightens at the act. She is eager to be gone, and doubtless scents the pool in the distance.

The delay, brief though it has been, has meant danger. The air seems to be hotter, the wind more blistering. Deming glances to the left, and had it not been for Billy would have turned to the side. Even the boy himself was momentarily puzzled.

In that direction what seems to be a new vista has opened out. It is the desert, but the desert with a variation. Certainly there was nothing of this kind there a few minutes ago. Over sand and alkali, and boulders their gaze reaches, and they see, far beyond, trailing branches of green-trees, fresh grass, and a pool of water!

"Ther mirage," mutters Billy, and pauses.

Somewhere he believes that scene has an actual existence, and there are now two figures in the landscape which were not there at the first glimpse. A man and a girl are hastening toward the water.

John Deming sees them also, for, with a cry, he stretches out his arms toward them, exclaiming, "Dora! Wait, child! wait!"

Though apparently hastening away, the figures grow larger and more distinct. If things were only as they seem, the cry, faint though it really is, might reach the strange pair; but they never turn nor swerve from their course toward the pool. The girl must be Dora, but the man who drags her on is a stranger, even to Deming. He is an old man, with long, white hair and beard. His form is stooped, his clothing rude and in tatters.

Still outstretching his hands, Deming stumbles forward, while Billy, uncertain what to say or do in the face of this new complication, follows after.

When they have gone a dozen steps in the new direction, the vision swiftly fades away. The desert comes back as it was before the rising of the mirage, and the two are left staring, the one shocked and in doubt, the other glad the vision has vanished.

"Don't go much on mira'kls, pard, but that's jest about ez big a one ez you'll see this side ov ther river Jordan. You've hed a glimpse ov ye'r darter, an' know she's safe an' in good han's. Ther old man hez picked her up, an's takin' her straight to ther drink. You want ter git a hussel on yerself an' then take it easy fur a bit."

"What was it?" is the dazed answer. "I saw her spirit, perhaps; what else could it have been. There is nothing in sight now but alkali and yonder sand mounds."

"Speerit ye'r gran'mother! You seen her jest ez she is, all right up to ther present time. No tellin' whar', er how fur, but that war' the way she looked, a trampin' straight ter ther water, with ther holy old hermit a leadin' ov her. Now, quit chin-nin' an' do ye'r duty! When we git ter camp I'll tell yer all about it, ef yer don't onderstand. Ef I'd knowed I'd 'a' follered but it's too late now."

"A miracle it was and a mirage at the

same time. I have heard of such things, but it did not seem possible it could be more than a vision. Lead on! At last I can hope."

Deming seems to be more rational than at any time since he has discovered they are off the trail of his daughter. He submits himself to the guidance of the boy, and toils wearily along toward the haven they think they see, not far away.

Providentially, they are not mistaken. Water they reach, with grass growing near its edge, and all three take a long and refreshing draught.

Then Kitsie applies herself to nipping the grass, while man and boy throw themselves down, in an utter abandonment of fatigue. Even Billy Bird is now willing to admit that the day has been one of danger, while, with this new element to be taken account of in his calculations, the prospect for the morrow is none of the pleasantest.

After a time they agther themselves up and make a scant meal from part of the contents of the boy's haversack.

It is wise to husband their resources. This unexpected addition to the force makes the commissary department weak for the campaign to come.

Deming has grown composed and is thoughtful. He is no more in savage haste since he has reason to believe that, for the present, Dora is in no greater danger than himself.

Billy is glad to see the change. He is not a boy to shrink from danger, but he does not court it uselessly, and no matter what he has said on the way he knows they cannot wander out to search for the missing girl by night.

He asks no questions now, yet Deming seems to understand that they would be in order, and ventures at least a partial explanation.

"The thirst was killing us, and when we came to where the dead men lay, I made sure we had missed the way and gave up. Dora tried to rouse me, but it was vain. It seemed as though I was dead already."

"Tol'able lively fur a corpse, you be."

"Yes; now. But then! Oh, I could have stood it all by myself, but when I thought of her it seemed as though something broke in my head, and I knew no more until roused by you."

"Reckon she orter hed a stick. That's ther way you needed rousin'."

"Just then nothing could have moved me. I had heard of these bluffs with their barren precipices, which have been called the Hills of Death. I knew of this valley, which has been called the Valley of Despair."

"Needed a guardean when yer went adrift in sech a kentry. Pity yer didn't recommember all them things afore yer started."

"I did. I thought of them. I had a young man who was recommended to us as one who knew the desert well, and I would have sworn to his faithfulness. But he went on, and then deserted us, or lost himself; our horses dropped dead, we knew not which way to turn, and only staggered on till I fell."

"Yer darter don't seem ter hev' drapped. Ef you hed kept ye'r nerves stiddy you bet she'd 'a' been hyer now. Jest ez well ez it is, though."

"No! Nothing is as well that separates us. You are cold blooded and cruel."

"Ye'r way off on that. Ef she hed stayed with yer you'd a broke her nerve down. I'd 'a' hed both ov ye on my hands, an' the contrack would 'a' bi'n a teenty bit heavier than I could 'a' kerried. This way, she's gone on an' found a friend, and it'll all kim' right in ther fall."

"A friend? How do you know? If I

could only feel assured of that half my misery would be gone."

"Didn't yer see him?"

"I saw a vision, a specter, a dream, perhaps."

"Dream be cussed! You seen Holy Peter. I've heerd ov him afore."

"And who is he?"

"Can't prove it by me; but ef you war' axin' what he war' I might hev' a word ter say."

"Ah!"

"He's a sorter hermit, ez sometimes strikes out on the war-path ag'in sin, an' gives 'em a preachin' thet's good fur sore eyes. Ther wickedness ov mankind are too much fur him, though, an' he strikes back to his holes."

"And Dora will be safe with him?"

"Safe enough ef we kin find 'em, but that last may be ther dickens ter do. He knows all ther wrinkles an' ther ridges, an' all ther water pools an' lurkin' places. He could live out hyer in ther sand fur a year an' git fat whar' you an' I'd starve in a week."

"But do you know nothing more? Where are his lurkin'-places? Is he good angel or demon? What is this mystery?"

"Don't s'pose he's more ov a myst'ry than you be, an' I ain't askin' questions about you," answers Billy, coolly.

"True; yet the case is different. He has taken my child in his charge; to know more of him might reassure me."

"An' how d'yer s'pose my mammy'd be feelin' ef she knowed I war' out on ther desert all alone with you? Mebbe she'd think I o'rter be askin' questions, too. Ef not, why not?"

Deming turns away without an answer. He has no confidences to give just now, and his eyes sink before the frank, fearless scrutiny of the boy. Is he himself a fugitive, a felon, or a saint? Billy Bird studies him well, but when he sinks to sleep that night he has hardly made up his mind.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY OF THE POOL.

Dora Deming is a girl of rare courage and considerable judgment. Not for a moment dreaming of the chance of aid coming in those desolate wilds, she takes the one course which she thinks offers a grain of hope.

Her father has for the present succumbed, but she will not sit beside him and see him die. Nothing she can say or do now will bring him to his feet, but she knows that, if he could have a well-grounded hope and a fair sup of water, he would make a desperate fight, and might win.

She slips away after a brief leave-taking, never daring to look back lest her heart may fail her, and the pair die together in that terrible spot.

Yet she knows that the nearest place where she can hope to find water is a long way off, and her strength has been sorely taxed already. It will not do to think of what may happen, or what must be endured. With head bowed down, and her mind almost refusing to think at all, she presses on and on, reeling now and then, and her panting breath coming with more and more difficulty.

After a time her feet overlap other footsteps which have gone before, and instinctively she follows, though without seeing.

She sees less and less of what is around her, and struggles on with more and more difficulty. The time comes at last when she wavers, and then falls hopelessly, as her father has done. It is doubtful if she will have the strength and courage to rise and renew the fight for life.

If her eyes had their usual keenness of sight she would before this have been aware that she is not alone. Not far away

there is a sand-mound, on the crest of which a man is seated, watching her with a sharp eye.

It is the same man whose image appears to John Deming and the boy. Perhaps he is wondering whether this might not be an apparition. He makes no movement until he sees Dora drop and rest motionless.

Then he rises, moves down from the hillock, and approaches the prostrate figure.

Dora is neither dead nor senseless. She turns a quick eye on him as he stoops at her side.

"Courage!" he whispers, as his hand rests on her forehead, and the one word gives her strength.

"Water," she answers, huskily, and the draught he gives her tastes as none other has ever done.

"Come," he says, clasping her hand as she rises to her feet. "Burdened with you, even my life is not altogether safe. There is no time to ask and answer. Away, at once!"

"My father!" she gasps, thinking first of all of him.

"Afterward, afterward! Your life I can save now; if we hesitate all our lives may be the cost. Without me you can do nothing. Obey, or I leave you where I found you."

Strong as is her love for John Deming, the love of life is stronger, and she has not lost her wits. There is no doubt that she is hearing the truth, and there is nothing for her to do but to follow where this strange-looking man of the desert leads. His face is one she instinctively trusts. So the flight begins.

An hour passes, and still they flee on, but now they are going down a slope which leads to what might almost seem another world.

In the hollow lies the landscape which the mirage had lifted into the view of John Deming and his rescuer. She sees green foliage and the inviting pool, and for a moment the sight gives her fresh strength. Then, without warning, her strength leaves her, she gives a cry, faint and despairing. This time, when she falls, it is utter helplessness.

Her guide does not hesitate. His locks are white, and his years have been many, but he has strength beyond his appearance, and catches her up as though she has but the weight of a child, and hastens on.

The perspiration is standing on his brow and he pants a trifle, but his strength is not at all exhausted when, half an hour later, he halts at the brink of the water.

The girl is quite unconscious, but breathing, so placing her on the ground, he laves her brow, and finally, after moistening her mouth, binds a wet cloth around her head and places her in the shade. It is some time before her eyes languidly, and but in part, unclosed, but he has made up his mind she will live.

A little later he moves her once more, and this time to a rude hut near by, which seems to be his habitation. There is a couch, not quite so hard as the ground, but the place is woefully bare of comforts.

The air grows somewhat cooler as the night comes on, and finally, though weak and dazed, Dora comes back to something like herself. She can understand, now, and listens eagerly to her preserver as he speaks.

"You have been down close to the gates of death, my child," he says, bending kindly over her. "For a while I feared you would never come back, but you are safe now. Drink a little of this. The danger now is the setting in of the fever, but that I hope you will escape. Can you eat?"

Dora gives a faint negative, but drinks,

and closes her eyes. Just now she does not care to remember or she might ask questions which the hermit might find awkward to answer. He busies himself around her for a while, and then silently watches. When certain that she is really sleeping, he turns away, and leaves the oasis and starts out alone on the vast waste of sand.

He has rested, somewhat, and eaten. The sun is no longer beating down from above, and tirelessly he gets over the ground with long, powerful strides. He is following back the trail by which he and Dora came.

An hour after sunset the moon has come up, and the sheen from its almost full face renders everything almost as light as day. When he reaches the spot where Dora was found he halts and examines the ground closely, to discover that since the time he left this spot some one else has passed by, and he makes out that there has been a man on foot and a horseman.

"It is not likely any other man can have followed that course so closely. It must be her father. He is on the right course and cannot be in as much danger as his daughter is, judging from his stride. But who can the horseman be?"

He follows the track for some little distance, but learns nothing more. He would have continued on the trail had it not been for the girl left behind in his hut. She may need him; and if he returns now he can take her good news.

This man of the desert rests himself a little; then he hastens back to his retreat, finding the depression in the plain and the pool surrounded with verdure by what might almost be called unerring instinct. He steals up quietly, fearing to startle the young lady, and looks into the hut.

To his intense surprise he finds the couch vacant, and Dora missing. What does it mean? Has she, with regained strength, started out to find her father, or what?

Surely she would have left some word or token behind to show how and whither she has gone. There is no sign of struggle or intrusion, but he has his suspicions, and casts around in search of a trail which may reveal the story of what may well end in tragedy.

And before he has gone far he finds it.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW JEAN BARTLETT COMES TO GRIEF.

Mention has been made of one Jean Bartlett.

Up to the day when John Deming and his daughter have their life struggle in the desert, he has been their trusted guide, and has only failed them when they come to the point where his knowledge is needed most of all.

He is a young man, built after the lines of the panther rather than the bear, lithe, supple, with an eye that can glow like a coal fanned into hot life by the wind, and a nerve which has given him a name. He is a dashing rider and a superb shot, and talks in a voice which seems strangely low and refined when one considers the life of the man.

Of their guide's good faith the Demings have not a shadow of doubt, even when they find themselves alone, pressing on from their camping ground of the previous night.

He has ridden forward on what seems to them a clearly defined trail, and left them to follow leisurely. He mentions no suspicions. In an hour or so, he has assured them, they will overtake him.

But, in less than an hour, something strange, horrible, and altogether inex-

plicable overtakes them. Almost at the same moment their horses are attacked, in a singular way. They toss their heads uneasily and look back in a shiver of fright or pain. The beasts neigh savagely, rear wildly, stagger, try to run, and finally pitch forward on the sand. The two travelers only save themselves by springing to the ground in the early moments of the strange attack.

When the catastrophe is complete the two look at each other in a dazed, helpless way, scarcely comprehending all the evil which has come to them. If Jean Bartlett was there he might tell them what to do; without him they are lost.

"I have heard of something like this," says Deming, hesitatingly. "There is a weed called loco; but it seems to be a slow poison, and death is led up to by a long course of it. There may be other weeds, though, which act with more promptness, and are less known, though even more deadly. We cannot linger here, but must set forward to join Jean. He will wait for us, knowing we cannot lose his trail.

But no Jean do they find, and after a time the marks of his horse's feet vanish altogether.

After that they toil on, falling, rising, coming generally near to death's gates, as has already been told.

There is a very good reason why they have not met their guide. At the very spot where he can turn aside without leaving a mark to show which way he has gone, something to the left attracts his attention.

It is some little distance away, and appears and disappears with a suddenness which would not have attracted the attention of one man in a dozen; but Jean sees it. With a hand on his rifle he moves in that direction, intending to go cautiously.

He attempts to flank the position, but by the time he succeeds the man he has seen is no longer there. He has taken up a new post of observation, which Bartlett does not at once discover. By the time he finds it his horse is attacked with the same strange symptoms the two other animals are showing almost at this same instant.

He understands the trouble on the moment, and, springing down, glances around for cover.

A slight depression, not many yards away, offers some sort of refuge. He springs to it, and drops close to the ground.

From here he can keep a watch for his foes, and yet have an eye on the animal, which he knows only too well is doomed.

The horse drops at last, and the death agony is soon over. Jean has seen no more of the dodger, and is in hopes he has retreated, since it is here he intends to wait for the Demings.

He raises his head carefully, to look over the plain, and on the instant is challenged:

"Stiddy, Jean! We ain't rushed yer, an' we give yer time till now; now we got yer jest whar' we wants yer."

The voice come as a surprise, and from an unexpected direction. Bartlett's head goes down as he speaks:

"Keep your distance till I know who you are and what you want. If I pick trigger on you, be sure I won't waste a cartridge."

"But yer won't do either. It's no use ter kick. Throw up yer han's, er throw up yer gun ef it suits ye better. We'll hev' yer in ther long run—dead er alive—an' which it's ter be are jest accordin' ez yer chooses. You can't fight four ov us when we'll all hev' ther drop ther minnit yer lifts yer gun."

"Two can play at that game as well

as three; and if the three miss, and the one hits every time, it makes things even soon. Play the first card!"

He rises from the little hollow to rest his weight on his left elbow, and the butt of his rifle is near to cheek and shoulder.

"Ther first keyard are played a'ready. You ain't got ace, face nor trump ter meet it. Ye'r in a hole, an' ef yer tries ter come out we ain't takin' no chances, but jest throw yer cold. Ef yer don't b'lieve we kin shoot, show us a pattern, an' we'll make a mark on it."

"You say there are four of you with the drop. Prove it and I'll give in without a shot."

"We'll take yer word. How does this strike yer?"

Four men rise up around him with pistols poised.

At that, Jean, for the time being, throws up his hands and surrenders.

The man with whom the parley has been held comes forward. He seems to be the leading spirit and chief commander of the outfit.

"Thar' ain't nothin' ov ther fool about you, an' that's a fact. Take him along, boys. You know ther rest ov it."

Two men slouch forward, looking at the prisoner with evil eyes, yet not altogether as though they mean him harm. They take his weapons from him, but leave the canteen swinging under his arm.

"Right about face, march!" says one of them with a grin, and between the two he steps off from the trail.

CHAPTER V.

DUBIOUS FRIENDS.

Jean Bartlett can understand well enough the meaning of this attack up to a certain point, but after that there is a mystery.

These men are not foes of his, and have not stopped him simply for the purpose of robbery. No. This thing has been done to separate him from the Demings, that they may fall an easy pray into their hands. That the guide well understands.

When he disappears, the two men who remain walk back on his trail for some little distance; then they sink out of sight in a hole, not in ambuscade, but for observation.

They see the two, father and daughter, wander by, and drop on their trail away to the rear. They skulk along in the desert like the wolves that come and go like shadows. When the man sinks down at last, apparently never to rise again, four eyes are on him, and one pair has a cruel gleam which makes even the rough man who watches it shiver.

They pass around the body, and keep the girl in view as she struggles on in her course, never dreaming of the human wolves on the trail.

And though far in the rear, they always keep her well in sight, until at last her strength gives out, and she falls.

As she does so the saffron-faced man, who has spoken little, is quickening his pace, when the other, the speaker in the parley with Jean Bartlett, seizes him by the shoulder.

"Down, down!" he orders, sharply. "Look yander, a leetle beyond. Thar's s'uthin' on ther hillock, an' it ain't jest a bit of rock, er a swirl ov sand, either, ner a wolf. By ther livin' Mose, I b'lieve it's Holy Peter hisself!"

Both men sink to the sand and watch the hillock anxiously. They see all that transpires, and watch the two go away together.

"You know him—you have called him by a name. Who is he?"

"Blast him, I wish I knew! Saint

Peter, some ov 'em call him. Satan on wheels some ov 'em find him. When he cuts loose he makes things howl; an' when ther other fit are on you'd think he war' a lamb in June. Two ov us ain't much use with him, onless we held ther drop."

"He's heading straight fer one ov his haunts on one of the islands, an' when she can't hoof it fuder he'll be game ter kerry her. We must not lose sight of them. The gal is in the cage, and must not escape. We must follow. If we can outwit this hermit, well and good. If not, he must die."

"All right, pard. I've took ye'r coin, an' I'm game ter let you run ther outfit. I know whar' he's strikin' fur, an' thar's no rush. We'll lazy along an' see that he don't drap her, but it won't do ter close up afore dark."

So the two follow along in the distance, like the vulture which may be out of sight, but is ever keeping in clear sight of its possible prey. When night comes down they are a mile away, but slinking around to the farther side of the pool by the bank of which Holy Peter makes his temporary home.

The hours go by and they creep up nearer, so that they are fairly looking into the little hut, when Holy Peter comes out and moves away.

"Where does he go now?" whispers the saffron-faced man, looking after the retreating figure.

"Back on ther trail ter find ther old man. He couldn't go sooner tell he knowed fur sure ther gal war' all right."

"If he finds him?" savagely snarls the other, handling his gun as though about to shoot.

"He'll bury him," is the cool answer. "You an' I know his chances, an' kin judge. Just let up on ther shoot. At that range you can't be dead sure; an' ef you ain't, you don't want to monkey with Holy Peter, I tell you! Let him go! Ef he strikes the corpse, so much ther better. Jest now, ef you ain't changed ye'r plan, it's ther gal yer wants ter look after. An' thar' she be, by hokey! Thar' she comes!"

The saffron-faced man turns with a start, and gazes in the direction in which his companion points. Did he not know what to expect he would imagine it a ghost which he sees gliding out, and away from the hut. Every motion is made with the utmost silence, and Dora seems to float over the ground like a spirit.

"What is that? What is the meaning of her movements? Is she trying to escape?"

"No. She's walking in her sleep," answers the other, after watching the progress of the girl for a few seconds.

The explanation is simple, and happens to be the correct one. Dora Deming has been completely upset by the trials of the day; and instead of sinking into a motionless slumber, she has a strange dream which calls her to her feet, and leads her away in a witless search for her father.

The two drop on the trail, and silently, but rapidly, follow it. She has gone in the right direction for their wishes; so they do not approach and make her their captive.

On they all go, and finally she changes her course and points again toward the spot where the hermit has rescued her. It is now time for the pursuers, close at hand, to interfere, so the leader calls out.

At first his call seems to have little effect, but when he has shouted her name a few times, she gives a start and comes out of her somnolent condition.

"Who are you? What is it that you want?" is her exclamation, coming more quickly after her awakening than the men had thought possible.

"Friends!" answers the ruling spirit. "We came searching for you, having followed the trail from where you turned aside to go with the mad hermit, who has saved your life."

"Followed me? Then you must know something of my father. You found him, no doubt, since you know of me, and he must have sent you to the rescue. Where is he?"

"He is safe enough, but still a long way off. Come. We will take you to him. To stay here is to invite destruction."

Without doubt or hesitation, she places herself in their hands, and the three hasten to the northwest.

CHAPTER VI.

TOOTH AGAINST STEEL.

It is night, now. Dora is weak. There is not a landmark in sight. Even the trend of the valley is no longer a guide. She could never find her way back to the camp of the mad hermit; and, though it seems to her he will never find her again, there is nothing better to do than to go on, even though this story of the safety of her father may not altogether satisfy her.

As she plods along her mind becomes clearer; then she speaks:

"It is good in you to encourage me, to say that father is safe, but if what you said was only to spare me the shock, I can bear the truth now; pray tell it to me without reserve."

"It was so near the truth that you may as well believe it yet. I can almost swear you father is safe, though I have seen only his footprints."

"His footprints! Oh, then he is lost indeed! He fell, and lay where he fell. I could not rouse him. I left him to bring aid if I could find it. Unless some one brought him water and hope, he would never move again."

"Some one did."

"You are sure?"

"Yes. A man overtook him, or found him where he had been lying. We made out the story, from the trail he made. He went on, and from the firmness of his footprints there is no danger that he faltered again. Their faces were turned straight toward the water. If they reach the spring they are safe."

"Yes, yes. I told him it was not far off. We had heard, but he would not believe."

"Pity that the madman turned you aside. It would have saved us a weary tramp, and you and your father would now be together."

"You are sure there is water to be found?"

"Positive. There is a spring at the foot of the hills, and when he reaches it he will be safe."

"You think he can reach it?"

"He is there by this time. In the hills above there is a party of miners, and if he does not find them they will see him. I belong to the outfit, and was on the way there when we came upon your trail."

"How did you happen to follow it?"

"We suspected the truth, and were willing to run every risk to make sure you were, or would be, safe. It is a pity you wandered away from the hermit's camp, however. Time and distance have both been lost, and you are more wearied than you know. You will have to rest soon; and another evening will come before we can make our way to the camp."

The man has hit the truth in this. Dora

cannot keep going much longer, for she has already used up much of the strength gained while resting in the camp of the strange being known as Holy Peter.

She manages to stagger on for a while longer, but at last the collapse comes. Were she alone on the plain, death would come with that breakdown.

Fortunately, they are near the edge of the valley, though many miles to the south of the spring they are all desirous of reaching. The man supports Dora, until they reach the spot he seems to have had in view; then he allows her to settle to the ground. A night like this, and a place like this, none of them need a shelter, nor is it likely there is anything near to harm.

Unless the Mad Hermit follows on the trail it is more than likely there will be no intruders.

There is one fact of which Dora is not aware. The men are almost as tired as herself, though they are better able to bear the fatigue. That accounts for the silence which falls so suddenly on the little camp. Before she has fairly closed her eyes her companions are asleep, without a thought of dividing the watches and alternately standing guard.

For a long time the silence is unbroken; and then, though not a sound rises on the night air, they are no longer alone.

A gaunt figure crouches, and glides nearer, and crouches again, with a savage gleam in its green eyes, and every muscle tense in its long, tawny body.

The mountain lion is not often dangerous to a man awake and facing him, but this one is hungry, and its prey lies with closed eyes and senses wrapped in the deepest slumber.

Dora lies nearest of all, and it is upon her the gaze of the gaunt and half-starved brute is fixed. It shows its white teeth, softly waves its tail, and, measuring the distance, gathers its haunches for the final spring.

At that instant the saffron-faced man awakes.

Whether the brute has made a little noise, or that he has scented the danger in the air, he sees the figure hugging the ground and springs to his feet, and toward Dora, just as the lion leaps.

Perhaps the rising of the man confuses the beast, for it appears to waver even in mid-air, and falls short in its spring, dropping a yard away from the girl.

Then it turns a trifle, and plunges at the man with a ferocious snarl. Suddenly confronted, it knows nothing better to do than to fight; and when that begins it will be to the death.

The man knows it will be fight, too. He has his knife clutched by the hilt, and meets the plunge of the lion by a rush of his own. Almost at the side of Dora the two join in conflict.

It is a very narrow thing that the man does not go down in the outset, for the paws of the great cat strike him on the breast, while the terrible teeth snap eagerly at his throat.

But, somehow, the claws slide away, the fangs miss their mark, and the steel drives in through the flesh, tearing a great wound in the neck of the brute. Then Dora, springing up in alarm, sees a rolling ball of battle, out of which an armed hand rises more than once to strike, while over all there sounds the snarl of the enraged brute.

Soon the man's arm goes around the neck of the animal, while his right hand, reaching over, drives the blade right through the heart of the lion.

That finishes the fight. The lifeless brute falls at the feet of the almost paralyzed girl, though the man, now on his

feet, drags it away lest harm may be done in the dying flurry.

There is no flurry, however. There is just a quiver and a gasp, which Dora does not note.

"What is it?" she gasps.

The man, after wiping his reeking blade by plunging it a few times into the sand, answers:

"A mountain lion."

"But how comes it here? In this desert valley who would expect to find animal life of the dangerous kind?"

"It may have come down from the hills. There are paths known by such beasts, though a man could neither find nor travel them. Or it may have followed us all the night. The cowardly brutes will wait for a week until they can see their chance. Then they know no mercy."

"And it came into the camp to attack you?"

"Scarcely. You were to be its prey. Most likely it marked you when you were alone."

"And has followed me ever since. What would have happened if you and I had not met?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, and retorted in Spanish:

"Quien sabe?"

"You have saved my life. Rest assured that neither my father nor I will ever forget it."

"It is nothing. We were too careless, and had anything happened it would have been my fault."

"Do not say that. My debt is greater than I can repay, and should you bring me to my father it will be more than doubled."

"We never know. There is nothing owing from you. I should have kept better watch, and after this there will be no such mistake. Lie down again and sleep."

"On the contrary, let us start again. This is no place for us to linger, and I am strong once more."

"I am glad to hear you speak so confidently, for I was afraid you would be broken down still farther by this affair. But you would only waste your strength, and perhaps destroy it altogether. Take my word for it. You cannot fit yourself for the toil before you by only an hour of rest. At the very best we will not reach the springs at the foot of the rocks before to-morrow at sundown, and any haste you make now will make the time so much the later."

"I believe you are right," Dora answers, sinking wearily to the ground.

"I am weaker than I thought. The struggle is too much. If you desert me I am lost."

"Never fear. I will not desert you, and to-morrow you will be ready for the journey."

"But if I am not?"

"Then I will stay with you until you are. And when I have given my word to friend or foe, for good or evil, it will be kept, or I will cease to live."

"Heaven bless you! You are a friend indeed!" murmurs the girl, as she closes her eyes, and so does not see the strange look on the face of her rescuer.

CHAPTER VII.

BILLY BIRD ON GUARD.

Billy Bird is wise in the lore of plains and mountains. He is a reckless, roving lad, who has given his mother occasion for much uneasiness, though needless was the anxiety, since he has come back so often, and every time bringing his sheaves with him, in the shape of money he has earned and experience he has gathered.

This being the case, it is doubtful if she would lose an hour's rest could she have seen her only child sleeping at the base of the hills which have been mentioned as the Hills of Death.

It may seem careless; but Billy is supposed to know his business; and, in fact, what else can he do?

John Deming has been so worn by toil and terror that he needs rest as he has never needed it before; while the day has been one which tried even the strength of Billy Bird, tough and seasoned as he is.

And then, having kept camp guard until midnight, and heard nothing and noted nothing to awaken suspicion, the boy desert-rover allows his own eyes to close and is so far into the Land of Nod that he is beyond the gate of dreams.

Billy sleeps on, but Kitsie is on the qui vive.

Her fine little ears are silently pricked forward, and her outstretched nose points toward the shadow line of the hills. She is neither lariatied nor hopped, and is free to come or go, for her master knows well enough she will never leave the vicinity of the camp without an order from him. They have been boon companions too long.

A scent of some kind evidently reaches her nostrils, for she moves quietly toward the boy, and finally stamps softly near his head, and gazes out into the night.

The sound is slight, but Billy is up in a minute, peering along Kitsie's line of investigation. His eyes are sharp, and he is sure he can see moving shadows.

Springing to the side of his horse, he turns her head in the other direction, striking her gently with the palm of his hand, whispering, "Go."

She goes, but picks her steps gingerly, and looks back from time to time, as though uncertain of the order, or loth to leave her master, who is bending over Deming, seeking to arouse him.

Deming wakens slowly, and in a dazed condition.

"Come with me, quick! There's no time ter explain, but git a move on."

He gives Deming another shake, which goes far toward making him thoroughly awake, and then darts away, crouching low to the ground.

Softly as Kitsie goes her hoofs have made some little sound, and without warning a rifle speaks, and the bullet goes whistling just above her back, causing her to break into a gallop. Then, the coming desert prowlers rush forward, their eyes turned toward the camp, and Billy evades their observation altogether, and from behind a sand hillock he watches the proceeding with an anxious eye.

John Deming is on his feet, a revolver in his hand, but he makes no fight. There is no opportunity for it, since he is covered by two or three muzzles before he recovers from his surprise, while the leader of the party, seizing him by the wrist, wrenches the revolver from his hand.

"Drap that, party! You don't want ter make no mistakes er you'll climb ther flume, on'y too quick. Whar's ther gal?" is demanded.

"Who—who are you? What do you mean? Hands off!"

"You ain't askin' questions now, ef yer knows what's good fur ye; but yer wants ter answer, straight ez a string. Whar's ther gal?"

The harsh voice grows more savage, and the question is repeated as though it is the last time of asking.

"Lost," answers Deming, solemnly. "She lay down somewhere to die, and I, miserable wretch, am saved. Find her, care for her, take her to her friends, and

whatever may happen to me I will bless you, and you shall be well rewarded."

"How fur back war' that? Speak up quick, an' mind you tell no lies, er it may be wuss fur both ov ye."

"Miles and miles back. It seems as though I have tramped forever since then. I have lost her; but I mean to go back. There may be hope. I think some one found her, but I am not sure. It all appears like a ghastly dream."

Deming would go maundering on, but the man has heard enough. He has been prepared for some such contingency as this, and turns to his companions.

"Reckon it's about ez straight goods ez he knows how to peddle. The old fool hez hed a sunstroke, er s'uthin' like it, an' don't know ther clear rights ov ther thing, but I jedge ther gal hez fell inter good han's. Ef she ain't hyer we can't take her; but we got him, an' he must go along. Shoot ther hoss ef yer kin reach it, an' look 'round fur ary sign thet kin tell ther story. I'll take keer ov him."

Kitsie stands away off in the moonlight, watchful and motionless. It is long range for a rifle, with nothing better than bright moonlight gleaming on the sights, and throwing away lead can serve no good end, as one of the men observes, dropping his gun from his shoulder.

Something about the animal suggests a possible rider; and a search of the camping ground confirms the idea. A few questions are asked of Deming, and he makes answer in a way which can hardly harm his young friend.

"A boy. Yes, yes, a boy. It is his horse; but they are gone. He would have helped me to find Dora, and perhaps if you have frightened him away he will follow back on the trail and let her know that I am still living. Do not harm him. He is only a boy, but he saved my life."

The man watching him utters an imprecation.

"Blast ther boy! Chris Carter, you stay to watch for him. He will come in sooner or later, and then you bring him along. Ther war'n't no orders 'bout a boy, an' I s'pose his corpus'll be as good ez his appetite. But ef he goes off sure, on ther back track, let him go, an' kim in fur orders. He may meet ther man ez'll 'tend ter him ef he goes fur enough, and it'll be better that way."

Chris Carter lies down without a word, while the others, taking their prisoner with them, start toward the hills, never suspecting that, after they have gone a few hundred yards they are passing within a stone's throw of Billy Bird, who, watching them keenly, rises when they are by, and follows warily on the trail.

On and on they tramp, until, finally, they disappear at the foot of what seems to be a perpendicular precipice, but Billy is not far away. Striking straight for the spot where they vanish, he finds a narrow, ledgelike path, leading upward. The darkness is thick here, and he can but faintly hear the footfalls above, but he goes on upward, until, suddenly, without warning, a pair of stout arms are thrown around him, and he is encircled with a bear-like hug.

CHAPTER VIII.

A ROYAL DERBY AND AN IRISH STRAIN.

Billy has been in dangerous predicaments before this, and does not lose his presence of mind. He is not sure what is the true course to take, because he does not know for a certainty whether his captor is friend or foe, though he naturally believes that he is the latter.

"Stiddy by jerks, pard! What in ther name ov sense be yer after now. Ain't I solid?"

The words are spoken in a whisper,

however; and the answer comes in the same fashion.

"Don't ye peep ez loud ez a chick in a shell. Keep ye'r bill shut an' yer hackles down. Muff ye'r heels, an' draw on the hood while we weighs in, er thar'll be a dead fowl in ther pit."

To Billy this language of the pit is not unfamiliar, so answers in kind:

"Fen gougins! Don't yer try ter break a leg er I'll hev' a gaff in yer afore countin' kin begin. I on'y fight at three pound two, but I got slashers on a yard long, an' cut to ther rattles, every time. I'm little but I'm game. What breed be you?"

Royal Derby, crossed on an Irish strain, seven pound six, an' a shake thet takes ther pit. It ain't no use fer you an' me ter weigh in ag'in' one another; we can't fight ef ther same weights, nohow; but I may hev' ter put yer back in ther coops tell I find me own match. Kim this way tell we kin talk it over. You don't b'long to that brood, an' mebbe you'll do ter show fur ther bottom weight fur our'n."

Billy understands this fellow cannot belong to the gang he has been following, or there would not be all this temporizing. The care which his captor takes to keep his voice well down to a whisper is another certificate. He has got hold of some one who may be a crank, but who may also turn out to be a valuable assistant.

"Say, pard, when I got 'em on the run it's good play ter sock ther steel in afore they kin turn. Ef the'r handler hez a chance ter pit 'em ag'in they may git in a chance blow, an' break a better fowl's neck. What's ther matter ter foller afore they wheel?"

"Nothin's ther matter, 'cepting weight will tell, an' it ain't good sport ter take sich big chances when we kin make a better match ef we jest holds on. Ef we kin git ther smallpox into ther coops we'll jest hev' it all our own way. You foller me an' we'll talk it all over."

"Do yer know ther walks 'round hyer?" asks Billy, a little anxiously, as he feels a tug at his collar—the stranger has dropped his arms away from around him early in the conversation.

"Like a book. Ther can't a chicken crow on ary fence but I knows what dung-hill he'll lookin' over. This way. I wants yer ter tell me what the Ravens ov ther Rocks be a cawin' over. Don't squak tell we git in our own corner."

"Stroke me keerful, then, an' handle me with keer. I might pick a eye out afore I knowed who war' a handlin' me."

He closes his mouth with that, and suffers himself to be drawn away, but would feel more comfortable if there was only a certainty that his guide was not only a sound man, but a moderately sane one, who would have an eye for such little things as chasms in the way, or any of the dangerous pitfalls possible to be met with while traveling in the dark on a mountain.

The unknown, however, leads him without hesitation or mistake, turning away from the upward route pursued by the outlaws, and having crept through a narrow crevice, which barely allows them to pass, they come out into the moonlight, and as though they were actually hung against the face of an almost perpendicular rock.

Below them, to be sure, there is a black blank, giving the impression of a gulf without bottom, but Billy can see over the shoulder of his guide a narrow thread, along which it seems impossible any one can crawl in that uncertain light.

"Oh, say, pard, I b'lieve I'll go back," chirps the boy as he catches a glimpse of the slender path. "I thinks my mammy

are yearnin' fur her only darlin', an' I'd better go home. I ain't dead sure yer knows ther road beyond, ef this are ther way she pans out afore we git started, an'—s'posin' we drap?"

"You can't go back. Listen! We jest turned ther corner in time. Drap ye'r tail feathers an' look ez though you war' moultin'. They're thar'."

Sure enough. In the direction whence they have just come voices can be heard, and the sounds of careless footsteps. Several of the outlaws appear to be returning.

"Ef yer knows whar' ye'r' at, an' how yer be a goin', reckon I don't keer about returnin'. Hustle on! I needn't foller further than I kin, an' it's dead sure you'll go over f'ust."

"Jest wait a second, an' you better do ez I do. I'm reasonable sure ov meself, but ef you show white feathers at a pinch I may hev' ter help yer through ther count."

The man stoops as he speaks, and with an easy, careful effort draws off his boots, which he fastens together and throws over his shoulder.

Billy does likewise, and the journey begins.

The distance they have to go along that ledge is, after all, not more than two hundred feet; but the walk would try the nerves of a Blondin. The salvation of the two rests in the fact that the rock at their right has a slight slope upward. Otherwise, they would never be able to tread that narrow path, barely a foot wide, and here and there sloping downward, so that it would be the easiest thing in the world to miss the foothold.

The man goes slowly, but never wavers. Billy has an idea he is waiting for him, and cheerfully calls out:

"Git a move on! Ther sooner ye clears ther way the sooner I'll be out of danger."

It does not seem as though the voice can more than reach to the one for whom it is intended, but it is incautiously loud, and a voice behind them rises still louder.

"Hold on, Buck! I'll sw'ar I heerd some un'!"

The voice is 'right where the crevice in the rocks leads away from the path to the plain, and it comes clearly to the listening ears.

The man ahead does quicken his movement, however. The path is not unfamiliar, and he treads it confidently, almost at a run, while Billy edges on behind, a trifle faster, yet still cautiously and warily.

Fortunately, they have not far to go, and while Billy stares forward the man vanishes, having reached the turn of the ledge and sure footing at one and the same time.

But just then there is an exclamation from the rear. A man, reaching the end of the crevice, sees the boy clinging to the face of the rock, yet moving along at a rapid rate.

The view is indistinct, and yet it is certain. With no hesitation the fellow throws up the Winchester trailing in his hand, takes hasty sight, and then pulls the trigger.

There is a crash, a cry of alarm or pain, and something drops to the ledge and then goes bounding off into space. When the man peers through the drifting smoke the boy is no longer there.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RAVENS OF THE ROCKS.

"What ther fiend yer shootin' at?" shouts another voice at the marksman's shoulder.

"Blamed ef I know, but I got him.

Looked smaller than ther bigness ov a man, but it couldn't hev' b'in a mount'in buck. Bercussed ef I ain't bewhippered. I seed it movin' an' let drive. She drapped, aryhow, an' ef ye goes down berlow it'll be thar', an' spread out over about two acres. Waugh! I wouldn't creep erlong thar' ef ther old boy war' behind, a tryin' ter drive. I'll dream ov ther pore cuss, ez he hove ther yell an' sailed down ther flume."

"Dream be blamed! Ye'r too mighty chicken-hearted. Ef his time hed come he hed ter take ther chute, an' you couldn't help ther pushin' ov him. You better draw out an' go fur a mishunary. Le'mme take a squint."

The foremost head is bent aside and the other pushed forward, the two staring at the spot where the boy had been.

"Yer b'in a dreamin' a'ready. Thar' never war' a man got out thar'."

"I tell yer, I heerd a voice. That's what brung us hyer an' that's why we're hyer now. Let it go at that. He's gone now, an' we kin prove it when we git to ther bottom."

Grumbling to each other, the two withdrew, to go on the downward path, while Billy Bird, safely out of sight around the turn of the ledge, lies on a broad resting place of stone and chuckles to himself. Perhaps his nerves have been a little shaken, but that is over, for, with him, a miss is a good deal better than a mile.

It has been the closest shave of his life, almost; and even now he does not know what saved him, though it reads like a miracle.

Just a trifle higher than his own head there happened to be a protecting hump of rock, and on this, in his haste, the man had dropped his sights. At hasty view it looked as though it might be the head belonging to the moving body.

The bullet sped true enough, and it was the broken fragment of rock which fell. Billy himself was already around the bend when the man looked again.

"A cat with nine tails couldn't hev' fooled him better," laughs the boy. "What's yer name, pard, so ez I kin giv' thanks fer ther way yer led me through ther rille?"

"Royal Derby," is the prompt response.

"That ye'r name er ye'r descripshun?"

"Full name, ez it's writ on ther register. Ther rest don't count."

"What rest?"

"Ther descripshun. You kin see fur yerself. I'm ther game chicken with a blue tail. When I cluck ther hull flock follers. Now, who be you?"

"Billy Bird, an' a rooster after ye'r own heart. You an' me kin divide ther walk."

"That 'pends. How kem' ye hyer? I didn't believe thar' war' another fool ez big ez I be."

"An' fur size I ain't. But, when it comes ter grit an' game, I'm large ez a ellefunt an' savage ez a meat axe. Ef it'll do ye ary good, an' ye kin be relied on ter keep ye'r bill shut, I'll tell yer, I'm hyer lookin' fur a bonanza."

"Hackles and pinfeathers! So be I!"

"I'll strike it, an' don't yer furgit it. I allers do. Ever hear ov ther Rolling Thunder Mine? I got a sheer in that."

"Can't say ez I did, but I'll take ye'r word fur it. How did yer git hyer?"

"Dumb luck—wich are ther usual way. Got a p'inter ov wich mebbe I'll tell yer more later, and lit out—me an' 'Kitsie.'"

"All alone?"

"We two; but we make a host. An' picked up a friend on ther way that I'll hev' ter see after, fust. They seem ter hev' stole him away—an' thar's a gal in ther case, though I reckon she's all right, up to the present time."

"What are they goin' ter do with ther man? I seen 'em up to some devilment, an' while I war' tryin' ter find out I struck you."

"An' a mighty rich strike it war'."

"Well, so fur ther color seems all right, but mebbe I made a mistake when I didn't let yer go by. Mebbe, too, I didn't. That's fer you ter say. You wouldn't 'a' done no good follerin' on ther way you war' doin'."

"Dunno that. When I'm goin' me own gait I don't gin'rally get very fur behind ther band wagon. I hed ought ter be thar' now. Kin we reach 'em from hyer?"

"In course; which war' why I brung yer. Didn't s'pose you would want ter fight ther gang on sight; an' ef they kill the man first off we can't help. Ef they don't, we kin be 'round when ther time bez arrove, an' help him out ov ther hopple. Who are he, an' what do they want with him?"

"Can't prove it by me. Jest picked him up when he war' on ther edge of ther Death Divide, an' rustled him through so fur. In course I don't want ter throw up my job tell ther work are clean done."

Royal Derby, as he has called himself, asks some questions, and drops for the time being his similes taken from the cockpit.

Billy answers after his usual fashion, and in a few words explains his meeting with John Deming, and all that he has picked up in regard to the missing daughter.

Then Billy asks some questions in turn, and Royal Derby answers them promptly enough.

He takes the boy fairly into his confidence. He is there prospecting, and under difficulties. There are other men in these hills who are outlaws, but who he suspects have struck the very thing he has been trying to find. He calls them the Ravens of the Rocks, which is a name not altogether unfamiliar to Billy himself, and though he believes that, as yet, they are unaware of his presence in the neighborhood, he has had a high old time dodging them.

Billy considers the information received and speaks his mind.

"Must be ye'r right. Couldn't make a livin' off all ther travelers thet kin's this way, an' ther's not much coin in playin' hold-up with each other. But, that'll keep. What I'm after now are ter see what they've done with the old man. You bet I'm not givin' him up till ther last horn blows, an' it'll hev' ter give a extry toot or two at that."

The man rises lingeringly, for he is tired and has not the personal interest which urges Billy on. He does not refuse, however, and leads the way by a circuitous and difficult route, though it takes them to the crest of the frowning hills, and finally brings them to a spot where they can look down upon the outlaws' camp.

The boy might have looked for it some time in vain, for it is well hidden, and just now is very silent, though there is a low fire burning, and there seems to be some one stirring in the camp. After a few explanations as to the lay of the land, the two creep down. If possible, they intend to approach near enough to ascertain something about the fate of John Deming.

They halt on the edge of a rock which looms up above the camp as a sheer blank wall of a dozen yards in height. If they cannot get down, neither can the Ravens of the Rocks get up without quite a detour. They lie there for some time without hearing a guard, although there is a guard apparently watching near the fire. His time to be relieved comes at length; he wakes up a man who has been slumbering near him, and the two spies crane

their necks over the edge of the rock above, both hoping they may learn something.

They are not disappointed, for in the brief conversation enough is said to show that John Deming is still a captive, that he lies near by, and that he will be held there until the Chief Rook of the Ravens returns.

That much learned, Billy Bird and his friend steal away, and after what seems a terribly long journey to the tired boy, come to the well-hidden camp of Royal Derby.

There Billy throws himself down in complete abandon.

"Ther man who wakes me up now'll hev' ter fight fur it," he says, as he closes his eyes, and before the words seem fairly to have left his lips he is snoring.

The sun is high up in the heavens when he wakes again, fully refreshed, and in every way himself. He eats his breakfast with a healthy appetite, and sees that from their eyrie they can look out over the wide expanse of the Valley of Despair.

In the distance he sees Kitsie roaming around, but no other living thing is in sight.

It is not likely the chief has yet arrived, and as he will come by way of the desert, Billy thinks he will keep a lookout for him. When Derby tries to drag him off to view with him a very likely prospect Bird actually refuses to go.

"Not this day, my young game cock ov Ireland. Some other day, perhaps. I war' ez wild ez you be, but when ther old man an' his darter came inter ther game I let loose all other holts, an' I mean ter see 'em through fu'st off, or never turn another wheel."

The result is, a division of labor is arranged. During the day Royal Derby keeps watch over the Ravens of the Rocks while Billy occupies his watch-tower overlooking the plain.

The day goes around at last, and the night comes down again. Royal Derby returns from a scout around the enemy's camp, and reports all quiet in that quarter. Deming is there, and a prisoner, but so far has been treated well enough, while the main body of the Ravens have been busying themselves at work on what he is reasonably sure is a mine. On the face of things there does not appear to be anything to fear about that camp, yet money could scarcely hire either of the two to attempt to enter it as a friend.

"Comin' at last," mutters Billy, as he peers downward from the top of a rock which commanded the way to the valley.

"We'll know now ther w'ust. Ef it's to be fight, ther Rock Ravens'll find us around, trimmed an' heeled."

"War to ther heel, an' ther heel to ther socket," chimes in Derby, handling his rifle.

"Dun'no' what it's about, but we're on ther side ov honest weakness every time. Tie on ther gaffs an' be ready ter bill."

They wait an' watch, finally getting a glimpse of the new arrivals. Several men tramp wearily onward, and between them they support the figure of the almost fainting Dora.

The little procession goes by, and the two leave their hiding-place and skulk away to the point from which they could overlook the camp, reaching it almost as soon as the new arrivals make their way to where the Rook Ravens are resting.

They hear one of the men say as he comes forward:

"I reckoned it would turn out all right. You found ther gal an' we got ther old man."

"It might be worse," responds the saf-fron-faced man. "But why didn't you kill him?"

CHAPTER X.

THE PROMISES OF REVENGE.

Billy has looked around carefully, but without being able to catch a glimpse of Deming. When he hears this cruel answer he feels sure he is not there and that the girl is well beyond the power of understanding, or it would not have been made in her hearing.

The journey of the day seems to have been too much for her, after the horrors of the preceding one, and she lies limp and motionless, while the saffron-faced man bends over and pours something between her lips.

For an hour the two watchers keep him in sight. When he leaves the camp, followed by a couple of the men, Billy gives Royal Derby a silent tug, and the two turn away also. It is their business to see where he goes to, and to do that, they must get to the lower ground.

Derby knows the route to be taken, though it is one which as yet he has not tried. They make haste, climb along a precipitous bank which barely offers them a foothold, and finally are on the level of the Ravens' camp.

The shadows are deep, and the two have to move silently. It is difficult to keep their game in view, even after they have found it again. Finally, the saffron-faced man and his attendants vanish from sight and hearing, and the two stop suddenly, puzzled and afraid of an ambush.

They go on again, however, and, by chance, or instinct, solve the mystery at the first trial. In the wall of rock which, at a little distance, seemed to bar their progress, there is an opening into which the three have passed. If one of them had remained at the aperture to watch it might have gone hard with Billy Bird, since he fairly stumbles into it before knowing it is there; but he understands in an instant and fairly pulls Royal Derby down with him as he drops to the floor of the cave.

They hear footsteps mincing along in the darkness ahead, and then there is a little flare of flame as a match is lighted, and from that a lantern.

"They ain't thinkin' ov us, an' we got ter foller. Ef they turn an' spot us, stick the gaffs in," whispers Derby, and Billy answers by a silent pressure of the hand. They creep along toward the light, knowing they are two to three here, and the two are between the three and the entrance. If the worst comes to the worst it will be a long time before the rest of the gang will know what has happened.

The cavern into which they have come seems to be of considerable extent, and before they have gone many steps they have lost touch with the wall altogether, and are keeping on only by the guidance of the lantern before them. If that disappears it begins to strike them they will be in something of a fix.

The pair keep close together, Billy grasping the skirt of Royal Derby's coat, and both suddenly crouch down as they fortunately detect the fall of a moccasined foot at no great distance.

The step goes on. So near does it sound that Billy is bracing himself for a struggle in the dark, though fortunately it does not come. They wait anxiously, but it will not do to wait too long. When the light disappears, if it does, they will be altogether at sea.

The lantern, however, seems to be stationary now, and they approach it cautiously, finally halting just in time, and even Royal Derby, who professes to be dead game, shivers over what might have been had he taken another step. Right in front of him yawns a chasm of unknown breadth and depth.

They turn in the direction which hap-

pens to seem the right one, and follow the crevice.

It leads them toward the light, but so far as crossing the barrier goes, they are as far from being able to do so as ever. When they halt at last it is because they are certain they are on the wrong tack, and that farther progress will only lead them away from the spot they wish to reach. At the same time, so far as observation goes, they could not have hit it better.

With his hand either of them could have pitched a bullet against the lantern, and they can hear every word that is being said, though the only person to be seen is a man who appears to have been acting as a guard over the prisoner. The light shines through an opening, and the Chief Rook is in another apartment altogether.

Every word he says comes distinctly to their listening ears, and the words he is saying are not pleasant, either.

He has been standing by the side of a rough couch on which a man sleeps, and who is awakened by the steady gaze turned upon him. At that, the intruder speaks:

"All things come to him who waits, and the thing I have wanted most of all has come to me. I hold John Deming in the hollow of my hand, and the revenge I have been praying for is mine at last."

The tone is bitter-savage. The newly-awakened man hears it to shudder.

"Yes, it was I who led you hither. It was I who allowed you to obtain, as you thought, traces of that Herbert Deming who has, in truth, been dead a half score of years. I knew that would draw you, and when you came I was ready for you. You are absolutely at my mercy, and I will have none, even though I swore that my hand should never slay you."

"And swore it to a dying woman, by your honor, and on the Bible, all the time meaning to break that oath. Kill me if you choose. Your punishment for your perjury will come later on."

"Ha, ha! You will die, but not by ball or blade."

"Traitor! Perjurer! Work your worst and have done with it. I ask no mercy from you."

"I need no spurring, and yet from stroke of mine you are safe. In spite of all the misery you worked on me in the past I shall turn you loose, to flee—if you can! Yet, I brought you here; I fed to your horses the poison which slew them, and when you lay dying in the desert, my eyes were near to gloat over what I thought your last agonies. Can you say I have not kept my oath?"

"Which one? The oath to Manuela, or the vow of vengeance to yourself?"

"Both, both! You stole her from me, and I swore to myself I would never pardon. By a horrible chance you came to her deathbed when I had planned it that I should be there alone, and she, poor child, forced from me the promise which, vile wretch, you have been thinking would save your life. Revenge has been long delayed, but it has come at last."

"Dora!" sighed Deming, softly, speaking to himself.

"Yes, Dora! She is in my hands, and were it not that I have other plans for her I would bring her to witness your last agonies. The daughter of Manuela! Remember that. I can forget her accursed father. She is the image of her mother. She is mine, mine! She always will be mine! You have snatched away from my arms one who should have been my wife; you have brought to me one who will be. If I had not sworn, I believe I might pardon you, after all."

He sneers, he mocks, he wrings the heart of John Deming in a way he thought it could not be wrong.

"Liar!" is what the prisoner answers, and all he answers.

"Never a liar. I keep my word good at every cost. My hand has not touched you; it never will. My men have bound you; two of them shall take you away. The journey will not be far. When they have a lasso strung under your arms I shall even take the pains to cut your hands loose so that I can say I have not seen you go crippled into danger when I might have helped it."

"You are going down into the den of the spiders!"

He stares ferociously at his prisoner, but Deming neither speaks nor moves.

"Oh, it is all the truth I have been telling you. Pedro! Sanchez!"

Two men come stealthily into the cell. At a motion from the Chief Rook of the Rook Ravens they catch up the prisoner and stagger away with him, while their commander follows with the lantern.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PIT OF PERDITION.

"Goshelmighty!" whispers Billy Bird; "it sounds ez ef he means it, an' we've got ter git a move on. Looks ez though it war' time ter begin a shootin'."

Derby is already fingering his gun, but seems in doubt. The light is uncertain, and the distance seems indefinite, though they know it cannot be many yards. By daylight they might drop them all and spare John Deming, but now the danger to him seems too great to take risks.

"We got ter go back tell we find er way acrost. He's hev'in' lots ov fun over it, an' won't hurry they fun'ral too much. I'm hopin' 'ter hev' time ter git in our work afore he gits ter ther jumpin'-off place."

"We got ter hev' time. Come on. They're gittin' away frum us."

Billy pushes on with anxious haste, and Royal Derby goes with him. Before they have advanced very far the light disappears, all sounds are hushed, and they are alone in the dark.

"They are onto us!" whispers the boy, and then Royal Derby puts a hand over his mouth.

But the saffron-faced man and his allies have no suspicion of the presence of any intruders, and go on as steadily as before.

"Say, pard."

Billy has the hand off his mouth, and at the risk of being heard by the outlaws cannot restrain himself.

"Hush!"

"Can't hush. I'm onto et now, big ez a church. Is it halves?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your diskivery an' my bonanza kin be lumped together, an' sheer an' sheer alike?"

"Them's ther articles we signed."

"I thunk I knowed it then, an' now I'm sure ov it. This hyer are ther spot I war' lookin' fur. Yonder's ther drift they war' a workin' in. Ther lead hed drapped, but they war' all riddy ter find it when ther top caved in."

"What lead war' those?"

"I'll tell yer all about it later on. They're riddy fur biz' now. Lay low an' keep dark."

The trio came to a sudden halt. A lasso is placed under the arms of the prisoner by two black-visaged men, and he is dragged forward so that he overhangs the pit before them.

The Chief Rook is satanic in his glee.

"Lie there, will you, while I arrange the lantern to light you on the road to perdition!" he shouts.

"It would be a pity not to see the devils who live in the pit where you are going, and who are waiting for their prey."

The lantern is tied to another rope and carefully dropped into the gulf.

"Now, then, down with him! And you, John Deming, look well below you, for it is your last sight on earth."

Deming closes his eyes as he goes rasping down the face of the rocky wall, but human nature cannot stand it for more than an instant, and if there is such danger as his enemy swears, he says to himself that he has the courage to face it so long as those infernal eyes are glaring down at him from above.

The pit is neither large nor deep, and the lantern shows him his surroundings. As he braces himself against the wall, one end of the rope drops and is pulled hastily through his armpits and upward, taking away what seems to be the last hope of escape.

With a yell Deming sinks down in a collapsing heap; the lantern is withdrawn, and the Chief Rook, silent at last, and feeling that his revenge will be more than satisfied, walks away, his allies close behind him.

At the outlet of the cave they find a sentinel, who briefly reports that no one has been near; then he, too, falls in, and the four make their way back to the camp.

Dora is sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, and this seems a relief, for, after looking at her drawn and haggard face, to assure himself that she really sleeps, and in no need of ministration, the chief turns away. Late though it is, he seeks out his lieutenant to make certain how things have gone in his absence.

Though he holds the reins with a glove of silk, the hand underneath grasps them with a clutch of iron, and the men know it. While they obey orders cheerfully they fear their Chief Rook all the same, when there is cause for it.

"How does the work go on?" he asks, his features losing something of the strained look they have been holding.

"Well."

"No grumbling?"

"Not much for the work done. They can break their backs when they see the yellow metal in sight."

"And is it in sight?"

"Enough of it to make them believe there is more to follow. If they had a clean record it would be a big strike. As it is, they know they must reach it in chunks to get the good out of it. You must look it over in the morning."

"Somehow it strikes me we haven't found the richest spot. We must look farther—but quietly. It would discourage them if they thought they had been throwing labor away."

"Any intruders?"

"No sign that we have found."

"Nothing of the boy you spoke of?"

"There has been no time to look for his body, and where would have been the use? He must have dropped off somewhere on the plain. If he had lived he would have come in to the water."

"True. But keep eyes open. I will look over the ground in the morning."

"If you'll let me say a word," the lieutenant adds, hesitatingly.

"A dozen of them. I can depend on you."

"You'll always find me true to a pard, and I can see when bread is buttered. It is about the girl."

"Go on."

"I don't know what you may think or mean, but you've lived long enough to know a woman in camp always makes trouble. My advice is, get her out as soon as possible."

"When I go, she goes; not sooner. She is an honest woman, and the man who throws a wicked word or glance in her direction had best beware. Drop hints to all the men to keep their mouths shut, and think only of the gold."

The lieutenant shrugs his shoulders, but he answers respectfully enough:

"I can give the hint—if they need it—but how long they will obey it is something else. If there comes any trouble about her I will stand by you both."

"Thanks! I trust you fully; but keep a lookout. One has to watch such brutes, and when a tiger-tamer is afraid of his pets it is time for him to quit the business."

"And we are not quite ready yet to quit."

"Scarcely."

The chief has heard enough for the present, but is not ready for rest. He takes the men who were last with him and goes back toward the cave. It is not his intention to leave the body of his victim unburied, and the sooner it is attended to the better.

Near the cave they halt suddenly, and the chief starts back, a wild look in his face.

"What was that?" he exclaims, pointing into the darkness.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RISING OF THE GHOST.

To go back a little.

The saffron-faced man has no idea of the deadly danger he is in when he turns away from pit and victim. Billy Bird has his thumb on the hammer of his revolver, and now that John Deming is no longer in the line of danger, knows that he can drop his man.

One thought stops him.

It is not revenge he is after, but the saving of John Deming, and whatever he is going to do in that matter must be done quickly. A fight with these men means delay, and though his chances at the best are slender enough, delay means death to the man in the pit.

The outlaws are hurrying away, and it will take them but a minute to get out of earshot. The two allow them to go.

"Ef we hed a light thar' might be a chance, but how kin we help ther poor chicken in ther dark?"

Royal Derby mutters the words half to himself, as the sounds of the steps in the distance grow fainter, and the light appears about to vanish.

"Right you be, an' a light we got ter have."

"So you say; but how'll we git it—ax 'em fur it?"

"Take et ef we have to, but I reckon I kin turn ther trick. They'll leave it about whar' they did afore."

"But kin you find it?"

"I should smile. Stiddy ez you are onless yer hears me give a peep."

Billy glides away as he speaks.

This cavern is a retreat which the Chief Rook will want to explore again.

As he goes on the light is extinguished. It is a big risk to run, but the boy does not believe that any of the outlaws will remain behind, and is almost sure his course will take him directly to the lantern he wishes to find.

He makes no mistakes about it, though it is as much by good luck as by judgment he succeeds. His hand once more trails along the rocky wall of the cave, and finally lights upon the very thing for which he is searching.

A faint glow from the mouth of the cave has been helping him somewhat, but when he turns that guide is lost, and he fears it is too soon yet to strike a light, though he already has a match in his hand.

He goes on in as much speed as he dares make, and thinking he is on the right course. Dangerous though the cave may be, he has not the time to make haste slowly.

"Peep!"

The sound is low but distinct, and comes from some distance on his right.

Royal Derby has given the signal, and it is well he does not delay. The boy trusts himself in the dark no longer, but lights his lantern, hurriedly rejoins his pard, and the two hasten away. Too much time has been lost already.

Fortunately, there is no trouble in finding the pit into which they have seen Deming lowered, and holding the lantern over the brink, they look downward.

He is still there, huddled up in the same motionless heap into which he lapsed when the outlaws dropped him down. What is much to the purpose, a lariat rope lies where it has been flung down by the Raven who drew it up from the pit.

Billy coils it hastily, sees it is long enough, and cuts off a piece from the nooseless end. With this he lowers the light. To their call John Deming has returned no answer, and it may be he is dead already.

"He's got his head braced up ag'in' ther wall, an' I don't reckon I kin git a loop behind it. I'll hev' ter go down."

"Are you crazy?"

"Not very much. I'll look after number one, but it's the only way to save him. Let me go."

The one end of the shorter rope Billy knots around under his arms; the other cord he holds with the noose ready for use. He slips his feet over the edge and Derby lowers away.

There is a little knob of projecting rock near to the head of the motionless man, and on this the boy manages to rest his feet, not without a shudder as to what living thing may already be occupying the spot.

He leans downward and sees a motion, slight but effective. Head and shoulders no longer press against the rock; there is just room for the rope to drop down behind them.

"Stiddy, pard. You got ter take ye'r chances now, er hev' none at all later on. Hyar she comes."

The noose drops as he speaks, tightens, and then Billy is scrambling upward, assisted by Derby from above, who loses no time when once the signal is given.

"Now, then, below there! Are you ready?"

"Yes."

The answer comes back but faintly. It is hardly a whisper, but it reaches the two, who then know they are dealing with a living man, and perhaps with one who so far has remained unhurt.

"One, two, three!"

And as he says three both apply their strength, and run John Deming up the face of the rock.

He is very much alive, for his hands spread out over the edge of the pit when he reaches it, and, almost unaided, he swings himself out and springs erect.

Then he gives one wild look at the two shadows he sees but dimly in the faint light, and, flinging up his hands, falls forward in a dead faint. His nerves have been taxed to the outside limit of endurance, and the wonder will be if his brain is not turned altogether.

His brain is all right, however, and so is the rest of the man. He comes to himself after a little, and though it is with a shudder, he seems to know he is safe.

"Let us get away from this horrible place," he mutters, as soon as he gains strength sufficient to stagger to his feet. "But, no—no!! Not yet!" he suddenly exclaims, as if all the fury of vengeance was in his heart.

"Give me a weapon—a gun, a knife, a club—anything! Quick! He must not live another hour!"

"Sorry, pard, but we don't allow ter fight ther hull outfit unless they have us in a snarl, an' thar's no other way out. Don't blame yer fur bein' hot, though."

"Hot! I am on fire. It's Heaven's mercy I am not dead. That I am not is a miracle. So give me your pistol, boy. I will not be thwarted now. I must seek vengeance!"

Maddened by the thought of what he has undergone, and the cruel threat about Dora, Deming moves forward as though about to wrest the pistol from Billy's belt, but Royal Derby is prompt to act. He encircles the frenzied man with his arms, twisting him over as though he were a child.

"No, yer don't. No time now fer foolin'! We didn't get ye outer ther pit to bring down the hull gang on us ag'in. Git outen o' this is the order now!"

Deming's strength seems to suddenly collapse.

"You—you are right, and I was mad; but when I think of the vermin of the pit to which he cast me, what wonder that I go wild? Ough! The crawling things! If I had touched one of them it would have meant death. But, friends, I leave everything in your hands. Tell me what to do, and I will not loose my wits again."

"Sing small, then, and foller us. It's time we war' lookin' over ther fence."

Cool now, he follows without question as Billy leads the way, though Royal Derby does not seem altogether to trust him, and keeps close at his elbow.

They make their way to the opening and peer through at the outer world. All is silent, and there is no living soul in sight. One after the other they steal out, and slink away.

They have almost reached the spot where they leave the valley, to take the tortuous path leading to the recesses where Royal Derby has been making his camp, and then they halt suddenly.

Some one is near.

"Jest in time," thinks Billy, as the three sink down and are lost to sight.

The Chief Rook and several of his men appear to be returning.

For the present retreat is not to be thought of. A few yards farther on, and they will be plainly in sight as they go up the path leading to the rocks above.

As they cower there, they hear the saffron-faced man.

"What was that? It seemed to me I caught a glimpse of a moving shadow. There! Over there!"

He points straight at the very spot in the darkness where John Deming lies. It seems almost impossible he can fail to make out the crouching figure; but there is a tremor in his voice which gives a hint of superstitious fear.

"Pears like I kin see it myself," answers one of the men, throwing up his gun with a sharp click.

"Let me s'arch it out."

At another time the request would meet with a sharp denial. Now the chief is more than a little unstrung.

"A trifle to the right. It seemed to drop right there. Aim low."

It was Royal Derby he has seen dropping there, and the muzzle, swerving a little, turns straight in his direction. Then, a deep groan rises from the spot where the gun has just been pointing.

The sound is unearthly, ghastly. The outlaws start back, and as they do so a specter seems to materialize out of the thin air. What really happens is that John Deming rises from the black shadow into the belt of white moonlight which hangs just above.

His eyes stare at the chief, his mouth hangs open, one finger points like a spear at the villain.

"Murdered! murdered! murdered!" comes from between the white lips, which never seem to move, and at the ghostlike sounds the outlaws are struck by a superstitious panic. Never doubting it is a specter, they turn and flee.

Just as swiftly the three spring to their feet and make a silent retreat.

CHAPTER XIII.

ASLEEP AT THE SPRING.

The panic does not last long, and after a little the Chief Rook comes back, ashamed of himself, and not certain the whole thing has not been an hallucination.

He finds no traces of intruders, which unnerves him a little more. The result is, he gives up his visit to the cave for the present, and after dismissing his guard seeks the slumber which finally comes.

He is up betimes, and when he meets Dora his face shows no trace of the excitement of the previous night.

Miss Deming is somewhat bewildered at the strange faces around her, though the men treat her respectfully enough.

She greets the saffron-faced man with something like delight, though her tone is full of the pain she feels.

"My father! Have you seen anything yet?"

"Nothing. The miners heard nothing of him, either."

"Then he is lost. This is the sole route he could have taken to safety."

"Calm yourself. When you have recovered strength you shall go find him. He may still escape. He may have turned around and taken the back track. Oh, there are some wonderful escapes, or, they seem wonderful to those who do not know how the desert can be fought with and conquered. You have had your own experience—what more likely than that he, too, has made his way to safety?"

He speaks in a low, sympathizing tone, and wins upon her somewhat, but not in the way he cares for.

"Yes, yes! It must be so!" she exclaims, clasping her hands and gazing eagerly into his face.

"He has been saved, but I must know how. See! I am strong and can bear anything. We must go now at once. I would die if I rested here another day."

The Rook gazes thoughtfully at her as she speaks, and considers the problem. He has decided already that he will endear himself to this girl; and it seems to him that this is the chance of a lifetime; yet, can she stand the journey? Will it be safe to undertake the search he knows too well will be hopeless.

He makes up his mind suddenly. "Yes, we will go, and at once. Better to lay down our lives on the sands than for you to live in this horrible uncertainty. Come."

And his saffron-hued face actually takes on a beauty of its own as he speaks.

It is a simple matter to say come, but there are dangers to the proposed journey which would halt a man who looked at all carefully to his ways.

The Chief Rook has already had a wearing time of it on those heated wastes which too often kill, and he proposes another season of toil which even he might be pardoned from shrinking from did not Dora utter the invitation.

Kitsie is the only equine in sight, and she is scarcely available.

The intelligent animal has run some risks of capture, but is still living and unharmed. The opinion is that her master had been hit by the bullet fired at the time of the attack on the camp and had dropped off somewhere to die.

Such is the story the Chief Rook hears given as a positive fact, and he has accepted it. He wishes there was a pair of

ponies, and that he had them in hand for the trip out on the desert. He is sorry, though, he did not endeavor to obtain from Deming some information about the lad.

He is reasonably certain that Dora can tell him nothing about the youngster, and does not care to question for fear of arousing her suspicions.

This man is willing to run any risks so that he may seem a true friend, and he succeeds only too well in blinding the eyes of Dora.

There are just three of them in the party, since the chief only takes with him the man who has lately been his companion, and to whom, by this time, Dora has become thoroughly accustomed.

They stride away resolutely, and somewhat to the surprise of the two men, Kitsie, seeing them from afar, draws nearer, and at last deliberately follows.

The men make some little effort to catch the animal, but at the first aggressive movement she throws up her heels and gallops away.

When they turn back upon the trail she follows again.

Then Dora, who for the most of the time is silent, and has a far-away look in her eyes, takes notice also, and by a moving inspiration tries her hand.

She succeeds without any trouble. Kitsie allows her to approach, and even draws near of her own accord. She rubs her nose in the hand which is outstretched toward her, and whinnies when Dora vaults upon her back. The girl is an accomplished equestrian, and settles herself in her seat with a sigh of relief. This may not be a miracle, but it is certainly providential.

She keeps her place when she rejoins the men who have been curiously watching, and after this the little party goes on at a more rapid rate, for the pace of the others has been accommodated to that of the girl.

There is one thing which gives Dora hope in regard to finding the place where she parted from her father.

She is a born plainswoman, and has kept certain landmarks in view, so that she knows the spot is on a straight line between the point she has just left and a certain peak away at the end of the plain.

What she may find there, lying among the corpses upon which they two stumbled, makes her shiver now and then, but find it she must if it is there. She would not take this risk unless it was to follow the trail to the bitter end.

And all along on the journey the saffron-faced man sustains her with words of hope and cheer. He has a heart as hard as the nether millstone, yet he can speak more gently than a woman.

The trip is no child's play, either, and it takes them longer than was expected. Several times they turn aside to investigate a mound of sand, a bit of greasewood, a hollow where a body might be lying.

At last Dora lifts her hand, and some uncertain words drop from her parched lips. She, first of all, sees the little heaps where she parted from her father, and for a moment fancies she identifies her parent in one of them.

Investigation shows he is not there. Looking around, she satisfies herself of that, and that there is no sign of a grave, nor yet that he has been devoured by the wild beasts she has fancied might come prowling for his corpse, or by the vultures, which might come even here.

"He is saved!" she exclaims. "But where, now, am I to look for him?"

The Chief Rook, watching her, sees her countenance change, and comes forward.

"We have learned, at least, that your

father is not dead. Mine shall be the task to help you find him, and we shall succeed. Something tells me that our true course is to seek the place for which you were aiming before you parted company. He will look to find you there, and it is the most natural thing to do. We can only go back now, and, having rested, start afresh this time to find him without fail."

The trio waste a little more time, and then turn.

The miles are doubly wearisome, but the two men seem made of steel, while Dora rides in hope. Kitsie appears to understand, and is in haste to get back to water and feed. Did Dora allow it, she would soon leave the Chief Rook and his companion far behind.

So plain is this that after a time, when the spot where Dora was found by Holy Peter has been well passed, the saffron-faced man plays a card that may be hazardous, yet which he thinks will make a point.

He tells her to ride on, letting the pony have her head. No danger but what the intelligent little animal will go straight to the spring at the foot of the hills. There is nothing there which will harm her, and she can wait in safety for the coming of the pedestrians.

The girl hesitates, slackening her strain upon the rope bridle they have fitted up, and Kitsie decides the matter for her, breaking into an easy amble, which rapidly takes her ahead. Once more Dora is alone in the desert, bending her course toward the distant hills. She has no fear this time, whatever may be her troubles, and though fearfully worn, at last slides down from the back of her mount, to take a long, refreshing draught, while Kitsie, too, is quenching her thirst at the welcome spring.

Then Dora throws herself down, too tired to care for the loneliness of the situation, too exhausted to think of any danger. In a few minutes she is asleep in the moonlight, while the stars twinkle with wonderful brightness, watching her while she slumbers.

Some hours must elapse before the chief of the Ravens can reach the spot, and from the rocks above no one seems to have sighted her coming. The sound of a light footstep does not even disturb her, though Kitsie, on the alert, has rushed wildly away.

The intruder seems to know the spot, for he drops first of all by the side of the water. After a hearty draught he looks keenly around, and sees Dora.

She lies so still and quiet she might well be taken for a corpse, and yet there is something suggestive of life, so that the thrill which goes through Jean Bartlett is one not altogether of horror.

He looks, listens, and then rises and steps softly to her side, bending down to get a better view of the face he has already recognized in the moonlight. She seems frightfully haggard and worn, but without a doubt life is strong within her, and Jean clasps his hands with an involuntary "Thank God!"

At that, Dora, opening her eyes, looks straight up into his face, and for the moment stares at him as though he was to her but part of a dream which was not altogether unpleasant.

Then she springs to her feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEATH IN THE CUP.

Jean Bartlett is neither a desperado nor a coward. He has lived a life largely of adventure and danger, and it has not made him either reckless or despondent. Prompt to act when life hangs on the deed of the instant, he is also content to

bide his time when the emergency allows.

Recognizing that there has been treachery afoot in regard to the death of his horse, he believes the same thing has happened to those of the two he is guiding, and he believes the natural course of John Deming will be to go back instead of forward, so as to obtain another mount for himself and his daughter. That means a two days' march to the rear, over ground which is traversable since they know the way.

But even if they come on he has his hopes, for though he goes with his captors he does not expect to remain a prisoner very long.

"You men are taking mighty big risks," he says, after a time.

"I don't know what your game is, but it may wind up by killing the whole outfit."

"Let us alone fur that. We'll git safer water, an' then p'int ye'r nose in ther way it should go. We ain't wantin' no outsiders peekin' an' a peerin' 'round hyer. Ef we'd 'a' hed our way we'd 'a' jest drapped yer ez yer war' goin' by, but ther boss said no. We'll see ther yer gits outen our way, swear yer in ter never kim back, an' then look out fur ourselves. We've heared ov Jean Bartlett, an' he ain't ther man we wants ter see jest now, even ef he don't reel'y mean ter damidge."

Jean scents a mystery as it may possibly exist; and if correct in his surmise the man may be speaking in good faith. In the regions where gold can be found such things happen. Men who believe themselves on the track of a bonanza would even do murder to preserve the secret they imagine they have. Perhaps he has been too cautious.

"That would be good enough if it wasn't for one thing. I didn't take the trail to find anything, and if you wanted to guard this region your best plan would have been to let me come and go in peace. I am only a guide, trying to lead a man and a girl through this desert valley, and several hundred miles beyond it. We would not have lingered an hour longer than we had need of here."

"Can't help it now. We got our orders from ther boss, an' what he sez goes. Kinder funny we didn't see nothin' ov that same man and girl. Whar' be they? Back in Saint Looee?"

"Back on the trail. I left them to follow. Perhaps their horses met with the same fate as mine, and if you take me away from them they will die on the desert."

"Thar's nobody dyin' when ther boss are around. He's 'tendin' ter that. You jest want ter pull out an' keep up with ther train. We got ter look out fur ourselves—an' we'll do it."

The fellow speaks grumly, and Jean understands the conversation is for the present closed. He plods along for some hours, and is satisfied that these men know more of the region than he does.

The canteen under his arm was filled at dawn, and he has husbanded its resources carefully, but as the day goes on it gets lower and lower. Disgustingly warm though it is, a mouthful seems wonderfully refreshing. When one of his captors asks him for a turn at it he hands it over without hesitation.

Even if he preferred to refuse, his words in that direction could scarcely do much good. Without seeming to do it he has watched these men like a hawk, and never once have they been off guard. He knows how rapidly a borderman can draw and pull trigger, and has had abundant evidence how ready they are for him at the first suspicious motion on his part.

He has keen eyes, too, and hardly has the canteen passed from his hand when he notes something which puts him on his guard. It is only an awkward way in which he holds his hand, but when, after a long swallow, or what seems to be such, that hand slips over the mouth of the canteen and is held there for a moment while the man gazes out into the horizon as if attracted by something he imagines he sees there, Jean Bartlett is on his guard.

He takes back the canteen, shakes it thoughtfully, as if testing the state of its contents, and then swings it again under his arm with the air of one who thinks it is to be husbanded more carefully than ever.

In his own heart he knows that, however he may suffer, not another drop of that water must pass his lips. If it does it may only mean insensibility, but he is more inclined to believe that it will be death.

How long he can stand it to stagger on he does not know, but he does know that it must still be a long distance to water, or the drug would have been tried sooner. He is more on the alert than ever, determined to bring matters to a crisis, but still no opportunity shows itself. There is always one of the men in his rear, ready to shoot if shoot he must, though they evidently prefer to kill and leave no sign.

Something must be done; and an idea comes to him. The carrying of it out can scarcely make matters worse, and some distance ahead he sees a cactus under which he might find a trifle of shade. He unslings his canteen, and putting it to his lips appears to half drain its contents.

Something about the drink he has taken is displeasing, for he looks at the canteen, and spits out the last mouthful in disgust, but makes no other sign, plodding on as grumly as ever.

Yet, after a little, his step grows uncertain, he staggers, weaves around in his tracks, and utters a low groan, as he does so, catching a glimpse of a strange look which one man casts back to his partner. At that he pitches wearily forward and in a huddle, with his knees bent under him and his elbows on the ground, while over him the cactus throws its slender shadow. But, in spite of his seeming exhaustion, Jean Bartlett is ready for a sudden spring and a fight for his life.

There is no need for either.

"Ther blamed thing worked mighty sudden," growls one, watching the prostrate man grimly.

"Blood all het up, and him a downin' it like that, ther wonder war' he didn't drop in his tracks. 'Nother victim of ther desert. Wonder who'll find him?"

"Don't keer so ez he don't find us 'longside ov him. An' he'll hev' ter be gittin' a move on ef he does. Et won't be long afore he kicks ther bucket, an' then we got ter begin ter travel. S'uthin' might happen ter us."

"It won't be long, fur it looks ez though he war' givin' ther last kick now."

Jean moans more feebly than ever, half starts up, and then falls prone altogether. He has heard every word, and understands that it is only his death they are waiting for. If he is not dead he is a very good imitation of a corpse.

When he dares to peer cautiously out of the corners of his eyes the men are already a hundred yards away, and hurrying off with their heads down, and no desire to take another glance at the gruesome spectacle they are leaving behind.

All danger is not yet over. He has kept close watch on the way, yet he

knows nothing of this portion of the plain, and though he is well seasoned to this kind of work, he must not only avoid the men who have just left him, and try to rejoin the Demings, but he must preserve his own life.

That is no easy task for one in his predicament. It is miles to water, and he has neither weapons nor food.

Of the struggle which followed it is not worth while to tell in detail. He reaches the water pool by which Holy Peter camps some little time after the hermit has left it in search of Dora, and sleeps there until late in the following morning. Traces which he then finds keep him there for a time, and afterward he sets out on a search, which brings him to the trail leading to the spring at the foot of the Hills of Death, though he never catches a glimpse of Dora until he finds her when he crouches by the water. Then she springs up, exclaiming, half in joy and half in horror: "You here!"

CHAPTER XV.

DOUBLY SAVED.

Dora Deming is glad to meet one whom she has known and trusted, but on the instant she remembers also.

This man deserted her when desertion meant death. She stretches out her hand to keep him back until he can tell the reason why.

The gesture reveals to Bartlett what she expects, and he makes his defense in few words, but certain.

She listens with gradually rising terror.

"This man, who would have slain you, has seemed a friend to me. More, he has even saved my life at the risk of his own. What does it all mean? What has he done with my father?"

"That is what we will know before we are done with him."

"But the meaning of it all? I can scarcely believe."

"Do you doubt me, then?"

"No, no! There may be some mistake."

"No mistake at all. It was he who poisoned our horses and maneuvered to have you fall helpless into his hands."

"And for what purpose?"

"That I cannot say. All I know is that there is a deep plot of some kind, and what you must not again get in his power."

"And my father? What do you think has happened to him? Is he living or dead?"

"Living, I firmly believe. Perhaps he is in the hands of this villain; but, if he is, we will rescue him. How comes it you are here and alone?"

"I had forgotten. He will be here soon, and we must escape while we have time. I was mounted and he on foot, but he cannot be far behind."

"Where have you been?"

"We have made a weary journey out on the desert together, searching for my father. Was ever woman so deceived? I know not how long I have slept, and he may be in sight even now."

She turns toward the plain, and the two listen. Suspicious sounds float to them on the night air, and they know it is time to be up and doing.

Instinctively she clasps the hand of Jean.

"We dare not linger longer here. Come. Let us hide in the hills. Whatever you may have heard there is a path up from the valley, for I have traveled it, and the chances are better there than in the valley desert."

Jean looks about him, uncertain which way to turn.

The cliffs rise around them on three

sides, for the spring at which they rest lies in a sort of horseshoe, formed by a bend in the range.

While they whisper together they hear more distinctly than ever the sounds of the not far distant voices, and turn for the nearest wall of rock.

Dora thinks she recognizes the route and attempts to lead, but she misses the path which would have led them to the camp of the outlaws. She is somewhat bewildered, and thinks only of getting away from the spot.

In her haste she does not watch her steps, and when she plunges into the shadow of the rocks never suspects what lies before her.

Suddenly she pitches forward as the ground opens under her feet, and she falls into a pool below, with a sullen splash.

She gives a gurgling little cry, which fortunately is not loud enough to reach the ears of the men who have just halted at the spot she has so lately left.

Jean hears it, however, and does not hesitate.

He follows of his own accord, but with a care which brings him safely to her side.

The depth of the water is not dangerous, but he finds that Dora, from shock or fright, is fainting. As he gathers her to him he feels her droop to him in a lifeless sort of way.

It is a fair place for refuge, but the chances are that it is known to the outlaws, and that, when Dora is not found at the other spring, they will visit this. Nor is it a place to stay in comfort. He staggers out of the water, holding her dripping figure in his arms, and, staring upward, looks in vain for a path over the rocks.

Then, to the left, he hears a hissing whisper:

"This way, pard. Go slow, an' not a whimper. Billy Bird kin show yer through ther rifle, but ef ther Ravens ov ther Rocks drop to yer ther' may be more ov a fight than fun in ther journey."

Jean turns just a trifle; his feet strike a practicable path, and he carries Dora on upward, while at the farther spring he hears a voice calling for the missing girl. He has been just in time, and wonders who may be this guide who has so opportunely come to the rescue.

He follows along upward, still bearing Dora in his arms, though he feels the thrill of returning life through her figure, and doubts if she has been seriously injured by the fall. From time to time he hears an encouraging word, or a direction, from the boy who scrambles on before. At last he staggers over the crest of the path and stands in the moonlight, with Dora of her own accord dropping from his arms.

Then there is a rush, and almost before any one can realize what is happening John Deming and his daughter are clasped in each other's arms.

"Dun'no' fur sure, but I reckon, pard, you be the chap named Bartlett. I b'in a-tellin' him you'd turn out clean grit, an' ther right sort ov a sport to tie to. Mebbe he'll believe me now. Shake, pard, an' lemme interdoose ye to ther game rooster with a blue tail what crows to ther handle ov Royal Derby. You kin be explainin' while them two puts in ther time jubileein' over ther lost lamb what hez got back to the fold."

Billy holds out his own hand, which Jean Bartlett shakes cordially, and then Royal Derby comes forward.

"Et's not like they will come up hyer, but thar's no tellin' whar' a chicken'll git too thet ain't a pure strain. Them down thar's only half bred, but they got ther weight, an' that tells 'n a hard fight.

Better roust out ov this an' git on our own walk. This 'show wants a bit ov orderin' afore it gits down ter bizzness."

The caution of Royal Derby is not out of place, and is heeded accordingly. The little party draws away from the neighborhood, which may be a dangerous one should the Ravens come exploring and by any possibility hit the path which heretofore has been seldom if ever used by them. Derby remains behind to watch for a little, and learns that the chief has no inkling of what has become of Dora, and fancies in some way she has missed the point altogether.

In that case there is little else that can be done that night but to wait, on the chance that Kistsie will still bring her to the rendezvous, that sagacious animal having kept herself carefully out of sight. Grumbling to himself, the Rook toils up the other path, and Derby rejoins the little company encamped in secure hiding.

By this time Dora has told her father about all there is to be told in regard to her adventures; but there are confidences on his side which he hesitates to make. He gives her an account of how Billy Bird came to his rescue, and how they had made their way to the spring, seeing her form reflected in the air while on the way. He even describes how he then fell into the hands of his one deadly enemy, who left him to die in a pit; but how that death was to be speedily accomplished he does not explain, though it makes him shudder as he airily skims around the edge of that part, and then tells how Billy Bird and Royal Derby had come, when he was numb with the prospect before him, and drew him safely up out of harm's way. He cannot find words to express his gratitude, but they all understand.

"An' trim my comb an' gills! didn't we git paid fur ther job in good, yeller ore. While we war' browsin' 'round didn't Billy jest drop right onto ther very thing he hed heard ov, an' me found ther sign? Ef we kin git ther Ravens out, an' usn's in, won't we hev' wealth ter burn an' solid nuggets ter throw away? In course we will; enough fur all ov us. It's thar' by ther ton, an' we're goin' ter win ther odd fight an' ther main."

Royal Derby shows that he is in high glee, and Jean Bartlett at least understands him thoroughly. He has been a prospector himself, in his time. John Deming is almost too much wrought up over the meeting with his daughter to imagine she will have much interest in the story of the discovery brought about by the attempt on his life, but she has a woman's curiosity, and finally begins to ask questions which bring out explanations, not only from Royal Derby, but from the boy.

Derby's story is a brief one, so far as he tells it. He was in this region when the outlaws struck it, having wandered here on a prospecting tour, undertaken alone.

He has found float rock and other good indications, and is just getting ready to break ground when they come, and he knows enough to retire in good order until he can find out what manner of men they may be.

It does not take him long to discover that, and to know that if they ever find him there the chances are they will send him over the range forthwith; but there is a fascination about the spot which he cannot shake off.

He lingers in the region, watching from his concealment the men who have been attracted by the same signs that fixed his attention. Evidently they have great hopes, thinking they have stumbled across one of those hidden mines, or rather its neighborhood, of which every

prospector has heard scores of times. For the rest of the story he refers to Billy, who now opens his heart in a way he has not yet done, even to the Royal Derby.

"It war'n't no great snipshun on my part," begins Billy, modestly.

"Derby war' jest goin' fur what his eyes told him war' in ther wood, but I knowed what ter look fur right enough, an' whar' ter find it. That's what brung me hyer. I hed ther pointers frum ther man what knowed—an', poor cuss, he passed in his checks shortly after tellin' an' I berried him rayself.

"I war' out scoutin', all alone, yer sees, an' I come across him; he had a broken leg, an' ther fever was purty well up in ther altitudes. I couldn't save him; but ef I hadn't found him I reckon he'd 'a' passed in his checks a couple days sooner; an' when he found he war' goin' he told me his story, straight ez a string.

"He an' his pards hed struck it rich, er thought they hed, in a place no man hed heerd ov fur years back, though it war' an old mine fur all ov that. They hed gone in an' started a drift, an' hed put in a blast ter blow out a few tons ov what they thought war' about the solid stuff, when the 'hull top caved in on 'em, an' thar' he war', with a broken leg, an' ther rest ov 'em out ov sight under wagon loads ov stuff, an' dead ez Julius Caesar.

"He got hisself out, but thar' war' no use ter dig fur them. He laid off fur a while, an' got sorter patched up, but grub began to run short, an' he found he'd hev' ter git.

"Acrost ther desert he crawled, draggin' his game leg after him, but it broke him all up, an' so ther poor feller give me point an' bearin's, described ther lay ov ther land, an' then threw to ther middle an' passed out. That's what Kitsie an' me come fur, an' I reckon we've found it. Leastwise, if we haven't seen much color, we dropped on to ther spot whar' that drift caved in, an' ef the chap that died kin be depended on, the gold's beyond it. Us two fowls are goin' ter see, an' ther rest ov yer hed better kim' in with us on ther ground floor. Now, old gent, I've opened out down ter bed-rock, an' it's your turn. What did you kim' hyer fur?"

Billy shoots the question at John Deming, who sighs as he looks downward and answers:

"I came because I was a gudgeon, and nibbled at the bait thrown out by my enemy, who brought me where he could see me slain at his leisure. I know now that it was all a mistake and a lie, and shall go no farther on what would truly be a fool's errand."

"That sounds straight, an' I guess it ain't wuth while ter crowd yer more. But you can't take the back track tell we git rid ov ther Ravens; an' then, mebbe, you won't want ter go. Stay with this gang an' we'll make ye'r fortune. Thar's rocks in sight."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BATTLE FOR THE BONANZA.

There are at least a dozen of the Ravens, and after what has been seen of their captain none of the little party can doubt they will for a moment hesitate at wholesale slaughter if they discover the presence of John Deming and his friends.

Royal Derby feels he has all the rights of a prior discoverer, while Billy Bird considers that he has a vested claim to the wealth which the survivor of a still earlier set of locators has granted him. Neither wishes to redden his title or open the war by bushwhacking and secret slaughter.

Yet in no other way can they by themselves hope to hold their own. Open warfare is out of the question, and the thought of peaceable possession a thing to be laughed at.

"It's got ter be this hyer way," says Billy, when they talk the matter over after Dora has sunk into a silent slumber.

"We hev' ter find out what we got, an' ef it's reelly ez good ez we think. Ef it's big ernough ter divide we kin work ther rest, ef it does take time. Derby an' I'll stay hyer an' watch out fur our chances, an' Jean'll take Deming an' ther young lady out ov danger an' spread ther news. Why, with a yarn like I think he'll hev' ter tell he could git a thousand men hyer in a month, ez would string up every Raven 'thout jedge er jury ef they didn't think it'd pay better ter take 'em back fur ther reward. Yer kin choke a dog more ways ner by feedin' him butter."

"The boy is right," chimes in Jean Bartlett.

"We must start a rush if the indications are equal to your expectations; and Dora must be taken out of the reach of harm meantime. It is doubtful if the two can remain here long without being found out, for Derby's stock of provisions is nearly exhausted, and Billy Bird, here, has no great supply for a long stay. But it can be tried if they choose to run the chances. It is too late now to make any explorations, but to-morrow, or to-morrow night, I must see for myself, and then start. If Deming has given up the trip to the southwest, for which he engaged me, there is nothing to hinder my taking hold of this with a will. I believe it is the chance of a life-time."

"To-morrow let it be," sighs John Deming, who is not altogether at ease in regard to his daughter.

"Judging from what I have seen and heard the chief of the outlaws will be apt to give the day to hunting for Dora. The danger is they may attempt a thorough exploration of the hills, and so come upon our traces. We must be on our guard."

Between them they keep a watch for the remainder of the night, alternately standing guard, and the next day are ready for business.

So are the Ravens.

The chief Rook, with at least half of his men, scours the plain, searching for sign, which somehow their eyes are not sharp enough to find; or if found they do not distinguish from older marks. Even Kitsie appears to be in the conspiracy, for she makes her appearance, coming in from the desert, and following closely the trail of the night before. It looks as though, somewhere, she had dropped her rider, and at last found her way back toward the water.

But the other half of the Ravens are on guard, or at work, and one man lies at the mouth of the opening which leads into the cave and to the pit where the saffron-faced man imagines the body of John Deming is lying. That secret is to be guarded well, though why is hard to tell, unless on the chance that Dora may make her way thither unseen and discover the fate of her father.

This guard is totally oblivious of the eyes angrily cast upon him from the nearby cover, and the discussion which ends in his being spared.

"I could fling a rope 'round his neck on'y too easy, an' he'd never make a whimper," whispers Billy, measuring with his eyes the distance from where the sentinel is posted to a spot he believes he could reach without discovery.

As he speaks he balances his lariat in his hand and makes a motion.

"Zip! An' we have him, with not another soul in sight."

"An' what'll we do with him then?" asks Royal Derby.

"We can't pick his feathers. Ef we did thar' would be a hackle hyer, an' a tail feather thar', ter show which way he went; an' then, gaffs do yer dooty, with them havin' ter longest heels."

"Derby is right," adds Jean Bartlett. "We must wait for our chance and do the work unseen. Unless we can corral them all at one time, and so have the drop that we can take away their weapons, it will not do to run risks. None of us want to go in to kill a dozen men in cold blood—not for all the wealth of a dozen bonanzas. And after all, so far as they know, they have a right here."

The day goes on, and the sentinel is at his post all the time. It would not be hard to capture him; but after that, what? Will it be better when night comes?

Several times the little party creep away, and as often return. They have hopes; and finally are not disappointed. The Chief Rook gets back from his fruitless search, and a sharp whistle from the encampment seems to be a signal to the sentinel, who hastens away.

Some chances must be taken, and without much thought of what may follow Billy Bird leads the way.

It is just a brief dash, and they are across the open space, and hidden in the hill. If the sentinel comes to his post again their presence will still be unknown.

Billy finds the lantern of the Ravens which the chief used during his visit to John Deming. It fell into the hands of the boy then, and he has been careful to remember just where he left it before the three made their escape. It will burn long enough for them to make the examination, and though hardly giving all the light they would like, it is enough for the present.

This time there is no hesitation, for the three remember the route only too well. Soon Billy leads them past the pit, which Deming cannot glance at without a shiver. In front of them the way is almost blocked by a pile of debris which has evidently fallen from the roof above, but along the top of it there is a narrow opening.

"Thar's whar' my man crawled through, broken leg an' all," says the boy, pointing upward.

"He hed the pluck ter kerry a bit ov ther rock what's beyond. It's a nasty risk, fur all ther birds mayn't be in the pit; but I'll go first an' report. Watch hyer tell I come back."

He takes the lantern with him and scrambles over the mass of clay and broken rock, leaving the others in the dark to await his return. It will only take a few moments to explore; and it may be he will find that the story in which he evidently believes is all false or fancy.

He is gone longer than they expect, but by and by there is a gleam of light from the place they are watching, and then Billy comes into sight. He hurries over the heap of stuff which chokes the passage, and holds up his lantern in high glee, revealing not only the bit of specimen he has in his hand, but the group of anxious faces.

It might have been better if he had been more cautious.

There is an exclamation of surprise from the rear, followed by a sharp whistle, and the noise of running feet. The Chief Rook and some of his Ravens are on hand, and have sighted the intruders.

Billy understands the sounds the mo-

ment they reach his ears and makes up his mind as quickly.

"Jest a minnit!" he whispers sharply, and then darts back to the opening above the debris and vanishes from sight in that direction, lantern and all, as a report roars out from the darkness, and a bullet whistles so closely to him that he can hardly believe it has not struck him.

He appears to have been gone but an instant when he reappears, but this time with his lantern low and hidden, coming so softly that the others do not know he is there until he touches Deming lightly on the shoulder.

"This way," he murmurs. "They'll wait a trifle afore they charge, an' we'll be gittin' 'round ther corner. It's a risk ter run, but ef they don't git woken up when they're about hyer er hereabouts call me a snoozer frum 'wayback."

What is the scheme of the boy no one knows, but there is no time for explanation, and, holding one to another, they suffer him to lead them in the darkness, and at their head he slips into the little alcove in which Deming was confined before being dropped into the pit.

The outlaws have a lantern, too; and hardly has the little party cleared the road when they rush forward, the Chief Rook at their head.

And then, as they reach the choked drift, there is a sudden flash of fire and an awful roar, followed by silence.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CHAPTER OF SURPRISES.

The coming of the outlaws to the cave is not a matter hard to explain.

When the Chief Rook returns from his fruitless search on the plain and gives the signal his men gather together to hear his orders, and among them comes the outlaw who has been on guard at the mouth of the cave.

He comes more breathless than the rest, for he has moved in haste, and he waits for no permission to speak.

"'Pon me soul, boss, I b'lieve I've got 'em!" he exclaims, bending toward the chief so that his words cannot be heard.

"Got who?" savagely asks the other.

"Ther gal an' all ther rest ov 'em."

"Them! Who do you mean by them? And where are they? Speak up, man, if there is anything in what you have to say."

"It's a gang, boss; a regular gang. Four er five ov 'em that I see; an' ther gal war' among 'em."

The Chief Rook remembers his experience of the previous night, and wonders if he was deceived then, or if this man has been mistaken now.

"But where and how did you come across them?"

"At the cave. You said she might strike fur thar, an' so she did. When you give ther call I started ter come in, but I took a squint back, an' that last look war' what did it. Thar' they war', a slinkin' in, an' ther boy war' leadin' ther way. I didn't stop ter see more, but raced out ter bring ther news."

"The boy! Curses on him, that may account for it. He stole her away last night before we reached the spring. But who are the rest?"

"Can't prove it by me. I seen 'em, an' let it go at that. Ef you wants ter know more you'll hev' ter hunt 'em out ye'rself."

At another time the chief would have stricken the man down. Now, he is too much excited to think of the roughness of the answer.

"Three men, a boy, and the girl, you say?"

"That's ther size ov ther outfit."

"Then follow me, half a dozen of you.

If they have hidden in the cave it is because they are afraid to meet us, and if we can come upon them by surprise it will be no trouble to take them prisoners."

The Chief Rook only speaks as he feels, and his men answer with a low cheer. They know that it will not be for their interests if a party like this gets away with the secrets of the camp in its possession.

The entire band are following their leader, but he stops that with a motion of his hand.

"Here! You men on this side are enough. The rest of you stay behind and watch. They may have come out again by this time, or there may be others in hiding. We've got a big thing here, but we'll have to fight for it."

The gang is divided into two parts, and, giving a few hasty orders to the one half, the Rook marches off with the other, approaching the opening to the cave with cautious haste.

The others stand watching their progress.

"Better all go tergether," mutters one, taking a step in the direction of the cave.

"Four kin fight six, but they'd throw the'r hands up fur a dozen."

"And then the chief would turn around and drop you," hastily interrupts the lieutenant.

"What he says he means shall go. Better keep our eyes open here, for if there are four why may there not be forty?"

He does not believe it, but discipline must be preserved even if he has to give a reason for it. The result is, the men advance no farther, though they are slow to seek for other intruders, of whose existence they have serious doubts.

While they linger there they hear faintly the sound of a pistol-shot.

Had they not been listening with feverish interest the noise might have passed unnoticed.

After that is a short interval of silence, and then a low, grumbling roar, which rolls out on to the night air and makes them look one at another. The crash of a dozen guns all fired at once would never have made such a sound as this, and, unable longer to restrain themselves, they start forward in a straggling line, some going faster, some slower, according as their anxiety overcomes their fear of the chief.

All would have got to the mouth of the cave sooner or later if the unforeseen had not happened.

"Halt, there, you villains!" exclaims some one, in a clear, shrill tone that causes every man to come to a sudden right-about.

A single man comes rushing down upon them, and he is only a few yards away. He makes a strange, terrible picture, for in the moonlight they can see a savage face, with gleaming eyes, and brawny arms, and a huge club which is swung aloft as though of but the weight of a feather.

It can only be an enemy who comes in such a shape, and two or three hasty shots are fired, though they do not even cause the apparition to stagger or slacken its pace.

With a great bound the man is upon the nearest. His club goes up and a man goes down.

It is close quarters now, and the outlaws try to fling themselves upon the intruder and bear him down by sheer weight.

It is what he wants, for it brings them within range of his terrible weapon, which he swings up and down, leveling a man at every stroke, all the time uttering a strangely-sounding snarl that puts the outlaws in mind of a wild beast.

A bullet wound more or less seems to give him no trouble, and a sudden panic strikes the outlaws still on their feet.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REAL RICHNESS OF THE STRIKE.

"What in hackles an' gafts does that mean?" asks Royal Derby, in an awe-stricken way as he recovers himself after the surprise.

"Took ther chances an' hit ther turn," responds Billy.

"Didn't I told yer they war' puttin' in a blast when ther cave-in cleaned the ranch? I found it all right enough, an' it war' them er us. Lissen a bit, an' see ef any ov 'em got away. I reckon it hit 'em about whar' they lived."

They do listen, and hear steps go stumbling back toward the mouth of the cave, and then a moan from the spot where the blast had gone off. The fight is for the present ended, and humanity impels them to take stock of the damage.

It is a singular sight which they come upon. The blast, strange as it might seem, has done its work even better than the men who laid it could have hoped for. The great pile of fallen rock has been blown outward, once more crushing and mangling, while from the pit into which John Deming was once let down to die a wild shriek suddenly arises.

Billy Bird looks strangely at Deming, as a glimmering of the truth comes into his mind. He can only guess what has really happened, but he is not far from the fact. The Chief Rook was not actually wounded by the explosion, but was fairly blown from the ground and swept directly into the den of the tarantulas!

It is his cry, given as he realizes the terrible truth, which brings John Deming and the rest to the edge of the hollow, where they stare down at the wretched man, who is writhing in terror and pain, while the loathsome shadows flit around and upon him.

John Deming escaped them, but there is no mercy for the chief, and he has realized his fate, for as those above stare at him he sinks, fainting.

"Ye'r rope, Billy! Quick, ye'r rope!" exclaims Derby, with a gasp.

One arm of the chief is raised into the air by the rock over which it rests, and round this Billy drops his noose with all the expertness of an experienced roper. The rest assist; and between them they drag the miserable victim out of his own horrible trap.

"He hated me because I won Manuela, and would have compassed my death. Poor wretch! His own invention returns to plague him."

Deming speaks softly. But now nothing can be done for the wretch, for they must look out for themselves. It will be no joke if the alarm is given, and they are cooped in the mine by the remaining outlaws.

Nevertheless, they carry him toward the opening. Such chance as they can they are willing to give him for his life, though even now it is almost certain the poison is working all through his veins.

They reach the outlet, and steady themselves for a rush, should it be required. Bartlett has armed himself with weapons found within the mine, and this time there will be no hesitancy if a collision comes.

"Now, then, ruffle ye'r hackles an' waltz inter ther pit," orders Derby, cocking his revolver and peering out. "Sounds ez though thar' war' a skirmish goin' on already."

All step out and hear the sound of fire-arms; then a couple of the Ravens rush by, never stopping for the challenge which Bartlett utters. Evidently they are demoralized and in full retreat. Jean waves his hand to allow them to pass, and advances to see what it is from which they are retreating.

They are in time to intercept one of the

outlaws, who throws up his hands when Billy Bird trains his revolvers on him, and as they stand thus the party who has routed the remnant of the Ravens bursts into sight.

He comes with a rush, but halts as he gets a glimpse of the four. Then he immediately advances with hand upheld, and then some one exclaims, "Holy Peter!"

It is indeed the hermit, who has found his way hither at last, carefully as the Rook had disguised his trail, and he recognizes the girl who has so lately been his more than guest, and that she is now with friends.

"Yes, Holy Peter, as some of the irreverent have dubbed me; but, who be ye?"

"Don't reckon it's wu'th while ter interdoose ourselves all round tell we know better what ye'r weight is, an' ef ye'r' on deck ter crow fur a fight. We are square ez a die an' dead game ter boot. Ef you don't like that kind, lift ye'r hackles and sail in."

Royal Derby is not inclined to trust any outsiders just now, and if there is to be war he wants it to come as soon as possible.

"What nonsense," responds the hermit. "I was in search of yonder girl, but not to harm her. If she has fallen into friendly hands, or found her father, I am only too rejoiced. I saved her from the desert, and while I looked for her father some one spirited her away. So that she is safe, go your way, and I will go mine."

"Herbert! Herbert Deming!"

"Who calls me by that name?"

The hermit starts at the name, but answers at once, looking keenly at John Deming, who is the speaker.

"Never mind who it is who calls. Answer me truly: Are you the man who once was known as Herbert Deming, but who has been lost to his friends for years and years?"

"Such name and such story are mine. I have sinned, and I have expiated. Now, who are you?"

"Your brother John. It was to seek you that I came here. It was to tell you, if you yet lived, that you had been more sinned against than sinning in the past, and that wealth and friends await you on your return. Do you remember me?"

John Deming has been excited, but his words seem to cut through his brother like a stroke from a knife. He throws up his arms and then staggers back, holding his hands tightly pressed over his heart.

"Is it true? Is it all true? Is my real innocence known at last?"

"It is. The truth should never have been doubted by the world, even as it never was doubted by me. But, how could I tell you? You were lost to us all, and to the world it seemed a sure thing you were dead. A report came to me that you had been seen a hundred miles or more to the southwest, and I started on that, willing to travel day and night until I found you and told you the truth."

By this time the arms of the brothers are around each other, and Dora stands near by, sobbing. It is a strange reunion, and still more strangely brought about.

"Thank Heaven for this mercy at last!" exclaims Herbert Deming, and then for a little while they are all silent.

The chief of the Ravens dies of the tarantula poison, without making farther sign, and his body is put under the ground.

Yet Dora has certain regrets and sorrow for his ending. He surely saved her life on one occasion, and though she knows he was bad to the core, she always remembers, as she had promised. Could it have been done, she would have gladly had his life spared.

There are certain other wounded men to look after, who eventually recover, and

are dismissed, with enough coin in their pockets to take them a long distance, and a warning goes with the dismissal that they are not to appear in this neighborhood again under pain of death.

Before they go, Jean Bartlett seeks to find out from them some farther particulars of the nature of the plot of their dead chief, but he learns little.

One thing is certain: The coming of the Demings had been anticipated, and the Rook had arranged that if he missed them on the desert his men were to seize them at the spring and hold them until he arrived. He had promised the gang good wages for carrying out his plans, and as he had always kept his word with them in the past they were willing tools.

Had not chance aided other elements, it must have gone hard with the original party of John Deming.

As for the bonanza, it turns out as well as is expected, for Jean Bartlett and the rest do not desire the earth. It is certain that each of the party so strangely drawn together accumulates a little fortune, and they are not alone in their good luck.

The noise of the find is famed abroad, and starts a rush, which gives them plenty of neighbors, difficult of access though the spot may be.

Some years have gone by, and Mrs. Bird is not called upon to worry as to the whereabouts of her only darling. Nominally she is his guardian, while, practically, he is still doing as he chooses; but he has no longer time to wander so widely. He has a keen eye for his business affairs, and an interest in two mines, both of which he watches.

Jean Bartlett is keeping house, and his father-in-law, John Deming, lives with him.

A certain Herbert Deming, once known on the frontier as Holy Peter, is seldom far distant from them.

With the burden lifted from his mind, and his relatives near, he has become an ordinary, everyday sort of man, and never pines for the hermitage in the desert where he spent so many years of his life.

Royal Derby, having established himself on a great ranch, and taken to himself a wife, lives in happiness, and raises game chickens galore.

So we take leave of them all.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street, New York.